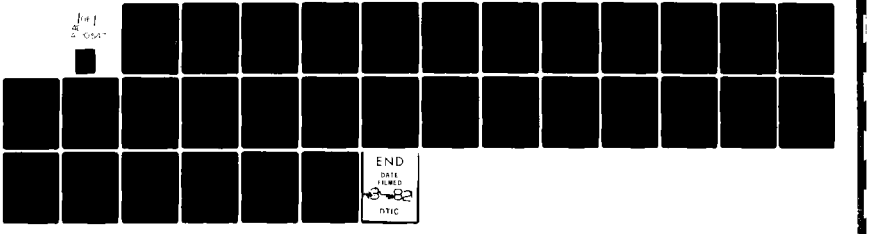
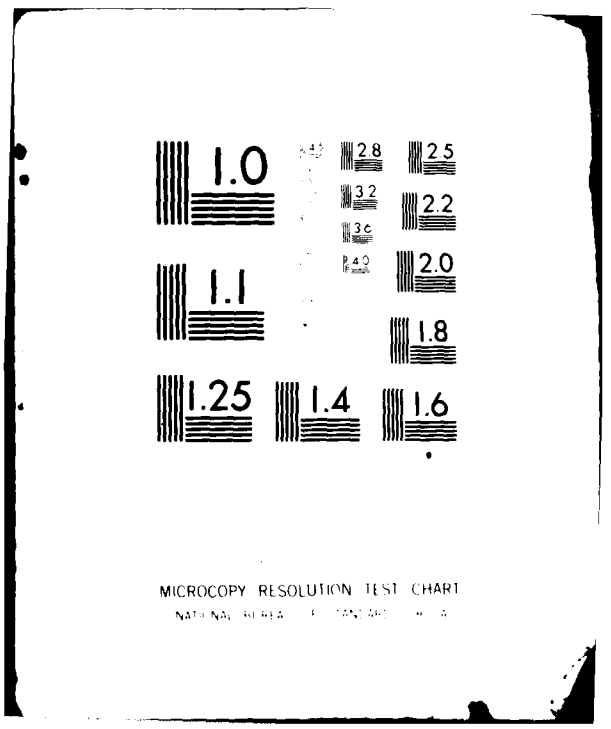
AD-A110 547 RAND CORP SANTA MONICA CA F/G 5/4
THE SOVIET THREAT TO THE PERSIAN GULF,(U)
MAR 81 F FUKUYAMA
UNCLASSIFIED RAND/P-6596 NL




1.0
1.1
1.25
1.4
1.6
2.8
3.2
3.6
4.0
2.5
2.2
2.0
1.8
MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(2)

THE SOVIET THREAT TO THE PERSIAN GULF

(12)
33

Francis Fukuyama

March 1981

2160

P-6596

82 87

THE SOVIET THREAT TO THE PERSIAN GULF

Fukuyama

The Rand Corporation
Santa Monica, California 90406

THE SOVIET THREAT TO THE PERSIAN GULF

Francis Fukuyama

Prepared for the Security Conference on Asia
and the Pacific (SECAP), Tokyo, January 1980

I. INTRODUCTION

The threat that the Soviet Union poses to Western access to Persian Gulf oil cannot be characterized simply because it encompasses a spectrum of types. On one level, the challenge is a straightforward military one. Moscow could gain control over the region's oil resources through direct invasion and occupation of one or more oil-producing countries. The Northern Tier, which was originally conceived as land and air barrier against Soviet expansion into the Middle East heartland, is now in nearly total disarray, and the former buffer state of Afghanistan has come under Soviet control. The USSR, as a land power with borders contiguous to Iran and, in effect, Pakistan, is in an obvious position of conventional military superiority over the West and its Gulf allies.

On another level, the Soviet threat consists of what used to be called "subversion", or active interference in a country's internal politics for the purpose of weakening it and ultimately making it susceptible to Soviet influence. Moscow's primary instrument here is the network of Communist parties it maintains throughout the Middle East, such as the Tudeh party in Iran or the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), whose main characteristics are their ideological adherence to Marxism-Leninism and their loyalty to the interests of the Soviet state. In addition, the USSR has supported the claims of various discontented ethnic groups like the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq and Iran with money, arms, and political protection. While the primary loyalty of a party like the KDP is not to the Soviet Union, such ethnic groups are often easily manipulable and can assume a much more powerful domestic position than otherwise as a result of Soviet patronage.

Finally, the Soviet threat consists of Moscow's ability to exploit purely internal developments for its own purposes after the fact. Indeed, almost all of Moscow's major successes in the Middle East during the three decades following World War II have been of this nature. The arms deal with Nasser in 1955, the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy

in Iraq, the Libyan coup and the Iranian revolution were all primarily domestic upheavals initiated by local non-Communist forces, which were encouraged but not actively or decisively supported by the Soviet Union. The USSR was able to expand its influence after these groups came to power by offering them weapons, economic aid, and political support.

It is likely that the dominant mode of Soviet expansion will continue to be the aggressive exploitation of developments internal to the Persian Gulf, either in the form of interstate conflict (such as the Iraq-Iran war) or intrastate instability (such as the Iranian revolution). The Soviets themselves are well aware of this: the "correlation of forces" between East and West in Soviet doctrine is a much larger concept than the simple military "balance of forces", and includes broader currents of social change. In the words of one commentator, "The foreign policy potential of a state depends not only upon its own forces and internal resources, but to a considerable extent, on such external factors as the existence of reliable, socio-politico allies among other states, national contingents of congenial classes, mass international movements and other political forces active on the world scene."[1] This is particularly applicable to the contemporary Middle East, where accelerated modernization has engendered social ferment and political instability of seemingly unmanageable proportions.

At the same time, the most likely mode of Soviet expansionism is not the one with the most serious consequences from the standpoint of Western interests; indeed, there is an inverse proportion between likelihood and seriousness. This is a particularly important point with respect to the question of Western access to oil. The Soviet Union has cultivated any number of leftwing nationalist clients in the Middle East like Syria and Iraq, and will probably do so again as a result of future instabilities. But the quality of this type of influence leaves much to be desired from Moscow's point of view. Ba'thist Iraq, for example, has been a Soviet client of rather long standing, but Moscow has never been able to control the flow of Iraqi oil to the West. In fact, one of the major bones of contention between Moscow and Baghdad since 1974 has been the latter's willingness to deal with the West on largely commercial terms. Where the Iraqis have politicized their oil

export policy, it has been on behalf of issues of primary importance to themselves and not the Soviets, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. The same would not necessarily be true in the unlikely event a Communist regime came to power in Iraq, which would have ideological reasons for linking its oil policy to the larger goals of the "socialist commonwealth". One could imagine a Communist Iraq offering the Europeans or Japanese oil on concessionary terms in return for a different attitude towards such totally extraregional issues as theater nuclear modernization. Even so, ideological orthodoxy has not been a guarantee of political reliability in the past; witness Yugoslavia or, more recently, the Khalq regime of Hafizullah Amin in Afghanistan. Where it has, the local party will probably be thinly based and susceptible to overthrow. A better outcome still from the standpoint of political control is the least likely in terms of costs and risks, i.e., direct Soviet military takeover. Moscow could be confident that Iraq's resources were fully at its own disposal only if the country were physically occupied by Soviet forces.

The different levels of Soviet involvement are mutually interrelated and follow an evolutionary logic of their own. Once a left-wing nationalist client turns to the Soviets of its own accord, they can exploit its dependence and vulnerability to buy protection for a local Communist party or separatist group, thereby creating a fifth column within the country. Military and technical aid and training missions fulfill similar functions of creating a cadre sympathetic to Moscow. An internal takeover by the local Communist party can in turn pave the wave for overt Soviet intervention. This was the pattern that occurred in Afghanistan, where Soviet policy evolved from an arms-length political alliance prior to 1978 to control through a local Communist proxy to direct invasion by Soviet troops. A relatively broad political base within the country is extremely important, since it can relieve Moscow of the need for intervention or, if that is impossible, be made to bear a major part of the cost of occupation. It is doubtful that a future intervention will occur without being preceded by substantial political preparation.

This paper will attempt to analyze recent and prospective Soviet policy towards the Persian Gulf across the spectrum of possible threats. Section II will place Soviet policy in a specific regional context by describing Soviet objectives in four key countries, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, and the means presently available for achieving them. Section III will analyze the general problem of intervention from a Soviet perspective, based on a reading of Moscow's historical behavior in the Middle East. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the implications that emerge for American and allied policy from the past pattern of Soviet behavior.

II. Current Soviet Policy Towards the Gulf States

(a) Iran

Russian interest in Iran has been so pronounced over the years as to be familiar and not require extensive documentation here. As far back as 1837 Tsarist Russia sought influence in the imperial court of Persia, and in 1907 was formally ceded a sphere of influence in northern Iran by Britain. Twice in this century the Bolsheviks have supported ethnic separatist movements in the hope of detaching individual provinces from the center and drawing them under the Soviet orbit. Soviet expansion towards the Persian Gulf culminated in Moscow's refusal to withdraw its troops from Azerbaijan in 1947. U.S. global power at that point was sufficient to force the Soviets to back down and, in effect, concede the loss of the entire Northern Tier to the United States. American influence in Iran from that point until 1978 was a source of both anxiety and frustration to the Soviets, who found themselves only marginally capable of affecting the policies of a country directly on their southern borders. The Iranian revolution was consequently a major foreign policy gain for Moscow, the beginning of a setting to rights of an anomalous situation imposed on them by American postwar preponderance.

Current Soviet objectives in Iran can be divided between those that are, in a rather broad sense of the term, defensive, and those that are more plainly offensive. Under the former category, the USSR has an interest in controlling events on its southern borders and making sure that Iran never again comes under American influence. While Teheran and Washington are unlikely to return to the overt alliance of the 50s, other more limited forms of military cooperation such as intelligence gathering are possible. In addition, Moscow may fear long-term spillover from the Iranian revolution in Soviet Azerbaijan, which has a substantial Shi'a population.

In offensive terms, the Soviets have a clear interest in controlling Iran's energy resources. With an estimated 57.5 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and 5 million barrels a day in pre-revolutionary output,

Iran could easily return to being the second or third largest OPEC oil producer, as well as an exporter of substantial quantities of natural gas to the Soviet Union. While Iranian output would substantially ease any projected shortfall in domestic Soviet production over the next decade, it is more likely that these resources would be used politically against the Western alliance system. One could argue that since the Western world has succeeded in doing without Iranian output altogether since 1979, it could just as easily accommodate Soviet direction of Iranian production. But the long-term political problem posed by Soviet control over oil does not necessarily come from the threat of an outright obstruction of output so much as from Moscow's ability to assure just the opposite, i.e., secure access to supplies in return for political accommodation. Soviet influence over five million barrels a day marginal production will give Moscow an important voice in determining OPEC pricing policy and leverage over the European and Japanese economies. Such leverage will make political gambits to detach the United States from its Western allies like Portugalov's proposal for an international energy conference much more plausible.[2] The Iraqis have been able to carry out a similar form of diplomacy with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of production lower than Iran's.

Beyond this, the effects of Soviet control over Iranian production would have tremendous psychological effects both on world oil markets and on the other Persian Gulf states. Iraq, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia would come under immense pressure to accommodate Moscow, and the lower Gulf would become vulnerable to military threats not currently feasible. The impact of a successful leftwing revolution in Iran would be to give encouragement to similar forces in other Gulf states. In anticipation of such developments world oil prices would probably rise astronomically.

Soviet options for dealing with Iran and gaining influence or control over its resources include all three types of involvement theoretically possible, that is, cultivation of the existing non-communist government; active promotion of Communist, separatist, or leftwing forces as an alternative to the Islamic republic; and intervention. Soviet strategy since the revolution has been to follow the first two tracks simultaneously, that is, supporting the Khomeini regime in its anti-American tendencies, while protecting the Tudeh party and other groups and encouraging them to

expand and unify their domestic political base. At the same time the tacit threat of intervention lies in the background.

It is doubtful whether the Soviets expect Khomeini or their alliance with him to persist over the long term. The tactical nature of their support is evident from Soviet commentaries and theoretical articles on the Islamic revolution, which have generally pointed to at least two contradictory tendencies within the movement. In one article, the well-known writer Primakov pointed to a progressive current with "definite democratic revolutionary potential" which has led to "profound political and socio-economic shifts in Iran". This seems best to describe the program of the Islamic Marxist Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, though it probably also includes moderates like Bani Sadr and some of the more reform-minded mullahs. On the other hand, the Soviets see a counterrevolutionary trend which serves the interests of the (by various accounts) Iranian big bourgeoisie or professional middle classes. This trend also encompasses "Muslim figures" who "display a tendency to neutralize and isolate leftwing forces." Just who falls under the latter category depends on day-to-day Soviet policy requirements. Prior to the hostage crisis it included the relatively moderate, Western-oriented figures around Khomeini like Bazargan, Yazdi, or the Ayatollah Shariat-Madari; lately it has expanded to include such figures as Sadeq Gotzbadeh, the ex-foreign minister. With certain exceptions (see below), the Soviets have avoided direct criticism of Khomeini himself, preferring to blame other unspecified members of his circle for policies with which they disagree. But Khomeini is clearly the implied target of many of their attacks.[3]

Soviet support for the Tudeh is evident in the heavy play given to the party in the Soviet media. The Soviets have made the regime's treatment of the Tudeh a virtual sine qua non of their entire bilateral relationship. While Moscow swallowed such events as the abrogation of the 1921 security treaty and Teheran's gas price demands silently, it became open in its criticisms of Khomeini and his regime only in September 1979, when there was an anti-leftist purge in the universities and the Tudeh party organ, Mardom, was shut down. An article in early September by Aleksandr Bovin in Nedelya called the regime a "disaster", a reactionary, fanatical theocracy given to anti-Communism.[4] This did not as yet represent the official Soviet government position, but was issued

as a warning of the seriousness with which Moscow took treatment of domestic Communists. In contrast to American efforts to influence the Iranian government, Soviet pressure was successful in winning the relaxation of restrictions on the party's activities, and the Soviets returned to unqualified support for the regime in October.

While a left wing takeover is more real a possibility in Iran than in perhaps any other Middle Eastern country, there is some evidence that neither the Soviets nor the Iranian communists think this is a short-term project. The leadership of the Tudeh party is relatively old and out of touch with the more vital political currents in the country. While it has a strong base of support in certain crucial sectors (such as among the oil workers in Khuzistan), it lacks a mass base of support or its own military arm. The mass anti-leftist demonstrations that swept Iran on several occasions (most recently in July 1980) indicate the left's great vulnerability. It is not likely that this situation will change until there is a general discrediting of the Islamic regime, either through its mishandling of the economy or the war effort against Iraq. As a result, the Soviets have encouraged the Tudeh to concentrate on building its domestic base of support, and to seek a unified front with the two other major leftist parties, the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq and the Fedayeen-e-Khalq. As Primakov notes, the transition to noncapitalist development will occur only "on the basis of the unification of leftwing forces and the mobilization of the working people, and above all the working class...."[5]

Iran's ethnic groups are also a potential source of Soviet leverage. Previous Soviet attempts to detach parts of northern Iran, such as the formation of the autonomous Gilan Republic in 1921-22 or the Azerbaijan and Mehabad Republics in 1944-45 were all based on ethnic separatist demands. Like its Iraqi counterpart, the Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party has always had strong leftwing sympathies and has looked to the Soviet Union for support in the past. Since the revolution, both Moscow and the Tudeh party have been very vocal in their support for Kurdish autonomy demands. When Kurdish agitation led to clashes with the Pasdaran Islamic revolutionary guards in the spring and summer of 1979, the Soviets urged Teheran to respect Kurdish rights and seek a political

settlement. While the violence was blamed on a variety of unlikely provocateurs (e.g., the U.S., Israel, ex-members of the Shah's "Immortals," the "liberal bourgeoisie"), criticism of Khomeini was clearly intended.[6] Iranian history has for long been characterized by the constant struggle of tribal groups at the periphery to pull away at the first signs of weakness at the center. The 1978 revolution was no different in this respect, with Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and Baluchis all pressing for autonomy. Any government in Teheran seeking to establish itself and bring a modicum of stability to the country will have to take fairly strong measures against ethnic separatism. Soviet support of the Kurds at this juncture seriously weakens the Khomeini regime's ability to prevent the unraveling of the country along ethnic lines.

The powerful centrifugal forces present in Iran guarantee that there will be a prolonged power struggle after Khomeini's death. It is not at all difficult to imagine the Soviets facing significant incentives to intervene under these circumstances. Even if the left is successful initially in seizing control of a number of Iranian cities, there are enough competing, heavily-armed power centers to prevent it from consolidating its control without substantial outside help. It should be noted, moreover, that an intervention could arise from either offensive or defensive motives on Moscow's part, and that the distinction between the two would be largely meaningless from the standpoint of Western interests. A turbulent and unstable Iran will provide continued opportunities for a return to power of a right-wing military regime that could in time gravitate back into the American orbit. Under certain circumstances, a direct American intervention is conceivable. Seeing no stable, non-communist middle ground, the Soviets may decide to intervene on behalf of the left in order to defend and consolidate the gains of the 1978 revolution. Talk of the USSR's commitment to stability or its "maturity" as a superpower must be seen in light of its own expanding interests. One of the major applications for increased Soviet military capabilities in the next decade will be the essentially conservative one of protecting its sphere of influence from Western-inspired sources of instability.

(b) Pakistan

While Pakistan is not an oil-producing country, its contiguity to Iran and Afghanistan make it both the target of and an obstacle to Soviet ambitions in the area, and consequently of considerable importance to the countries of the Gulf. The Soviets have so far succeeded in effectively neutralizing Pakistan and making the cost of renewed American or Chinese influence in that country prohibitively high. In the future, Soviet policy will probably move in two directions: first, towards eliminating or at least controlling the threat from Pakistan to its own position in Afghanistan, and second, towards obtaining a port or airbase directly on the Arabian Sea through the balkanization of Pakistan.

From a high point in the late 50's when it was an integral member of the Northern Tier and a major recipient of U.S. military assistance, Pakistan has fallen to the position of a cautious neutral in the U.S.-Soviet rivalry towards the Gulf. This does not represent a shift towards nonalignment on the part of Pakistani elites, who remain as a whole strongly pro-Western and hopeful of a renewed military relationship with the United States. It reflects instead the change in the regional balance of forces that has taken place over the past two and a half decades. Islamabad's security problem has become seemingly insuperable: to the east it faces India, a quantitatively and qualitatively superior enemy which in the past decade has succeeded, with Soviet help, in widening its margin of superiority, while in the west the Pakistanis must now contend with the ten Soviet divisions deployed in Afghanistan. The $1.6 billion Soviet-Indian arms deal concluded in May 1980 indicates that relations between the two countries, far from having been weakened by the Afghan invasion, are now stronger than ever. It is therefore not surprising that the American offer of $200 million over two years in military sales credits to Pakistan was rejected in March 1980 as insufficient and provocative. In order to keep Pakistan in the Western orbit the United States would have to offer it a major rearmament program on the scale of what is now being provided to Egypt and Turkey.[7] The Carter Administration was not willing to pay this price, although the Reagan Administration has indicated its willingness to offer Pakistan a $3 billion five-year arms package.

Soviet power in South Asia thus far has been sufficient to control but not eliminate Pakistani assistance to the insurgency. There is at present a tacit political understanding between Moscow and Islamabad to the effect that if the latter does not permit significant amounts and types of weapons to reach the rebels, the former will respect the present border and not attack sanctuaries or infiltration routes into Afghanistan. This "agreement" has been more or less respected by both sides up until now, but could easily break down. Islamabad's political control over the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) bordering Afghanistan has always been limited. Under an administrative system inherited from the British, the tribes in the areas immediately adjoining the Afghan border are left to regulate their own affairs, while the Pakistani military presence in the NWFP is limited to two infantry divisions and a small paramilitary border force. These units would have an extremely difficult time preventing the heavily-armed tribesmen from crossing the hundreds of tracks and trails into Afghanistan, even if this were politically acceptable in terms of domestic Pakistani politics. The Soviets may decide that the sanctuaries in Pakistan are too important to the success of the insurgency to be left alone, and attack them regardless of Islamabad's policy towards the rebels. The Soviets could shell or bomb border villages and refugee camps, demoralizing the opposition and forcing the tribes back from the frontier. At one extreme, Moscow could attempt to detach and pacify the tribal agencies of the NWFP, in effect creating the state of Pushtunistan long desired by the Afghans. The international border could then be redrawn along a much more defensible line at the base of the foothills rather than at the watershed where it currently exists.

The prospects for the creation of an independent Baluchi state giving Moscow direct access to the Arabian Sea are not particularly good over the near term, but may improve. The separatist movement in Baluchistan can be divided into two parts, an older group of tribal leaders like the Marris, Mangels, and Bizenjos, whose loyalties are primarily feudal, and a younger cadre of ideologically-motivated leftist students who are sympathetic to the Soviet Union and the PDPA in Afghanistan. The rebellion that occurred between 1973 and 1977 was

tribally based. While it tied down a large portion of the Pakistani army at first, it was basically brought under control by 1975 and ended with the surrender of the last rebels by 1977. A replay of this war would probably lead to similar results, even if the tribes were equipped with Soviet weapons. The younger Baluch have not been able to cooperate with the older leaders in the past, and their operations have been confined to the towns of Sibi and Quetta. It is difficult to imagine them mounting more than an urban terrorist campaign at present. Over the longer term, however, the separatist threat may become more severe: if the tribes and students are able to cooperate, particularly at a time when the Pakistani army was preoccupied with India and the Soviets, arms from Afghanistan could prove sufficient to tip the balance in their favor.

(c) Iraq

Iraq remains the linchpin of Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf. It is one of Moscow's oldest Middle Eastern clients and the signatory of a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty. For many years Iraq's primary value to the Soviet Union lay in its potential for destabilizing the Persian Gulf and thereby undercutting Western influence. Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980 indicates that it has not lost its ability to perform this function, as is occasionally suggested by some in the West. Nonetheless, the balance of political interests in the Gulf has shifted sufficiently that Moscow can no longer regard this kind of destabilization as an unmixed blessing. From a Soviet perspective Iraq is something of an unguided missile, on balance harming Western interests more than Moscow's, but on any given occasion liable to go completely out of control.

Under the proper circumstances, the Soviets might have favored an Iraqi attack on Iran. Teheran's military humiliation could have brought about the downfall of Khomeini regime, leaving a vacuum at the center to be filled by the Tudeh party and the left. The Soviets in a similar situation permitted the Somali attack on Ethiopia in 1977 and used it as a vehicle subsequently for gaining influence in Addis Ababa. But the timing of the Iraqi attack was wrong from the perspective of

Soviet interests. The left in Iran was too weak and disorganized to take advantage of the opportunities created, while the military right might benefit from the heightened importance it would assume as a result of the war effort. The war, moreover, could serve as a pretext for the direct introduction of American military power into the Persian Gulf, as the decision to deploy AWACS aircraft in Saudi Arabia suggested.

As a result the Soviets did not welcome, encourage, or assist after the fact the Iraqi invasion of Khuzistan, and began pressuring Baghdad to cease firing and come to a negotiated settlement. Moscow had issued warnings to both countries not to go to war since at least the previous April.[8] Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, who was in Moscow both at the outset of the war and again in November, consulted with the Soviets but evidently failed to win from them either promises of increased arms supply or political support. Instead, the Soviets quickly declared their neutrality towards the conflict. Leonid Brezhnev warned that "neither Iraq, nor Iran will gain anything from mutual destruction, bloodshed, and undermining each other's economy. It is only the third side (i.e., the United States)...which stands to gain."[9] The Soviets took certain measures to facilitate the Iranian war effort, such as allowing the shipment of Libyan and Syrian spare parts over Soviet airspace, and there were persistent rumors of Soviet offers to sell equipment directly to Iran. All the while, Moscow allowed the Iraqi Communists to call for the overthrow of the Ba'th Party from Soviet territory.[10]

Moscow's lack of control over many Iraqi actions--as evidenced by the war--has been a general problem in Soviet dealings with leftwing nationalists like the Iraqi Ba'th. Following a period of relatively close cooperation between 1971 and 1975, the Iraqis contradicted Soviet wishes first by massively increasing the share of their external trade going to the West, and then by diversifying their sources of weapons to European countries like France and Spain. More recently the Iraqis have moved closer to the pro-Western states of the Gulf and proposed a variety of regional security schemes to exclude both superpowers. There is reason to believe that the well publicized conflict between Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the Iraqi Ba'th after 1978 was not merely another irritant to bilateral realtions, but reflected a Soviet effort to improve the ICP's position in the army so as to weaken and ultimately replace the Ba'th.

If so, the effort failed and the ICP was suppressed with great ruthlessness. The leadership and most of the rank and file of the party was killed, jailed or forced to flee to the Soviet Union or the PDRY. The party infrastructure within Iraq was all but eliminated and will not present a threat to Ba'thist predominance anytime in the foreseeable future. The Soviets played their Communist card in Iraq and lost, and are left without further means of affecting internal Iraqi politics. In the future, they will have to revert to their traditional methods of using arms transfers as an instrument of leverage. This might be of some value as long as the war with Iran continues and the Iraqis need ammunition and spare parts for their Soviet-built equipment. But over the long run such arms dependency has proven to be a relatively weak means of political control, given Baghdad's access to hard currencies and European arms markets.

(d) Saudi Arabia and the Lower Gulf

Saudi Arabia remains the focal point of any struggle for hegemony over the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia is the only OPEC producer control of whose oil reserves will by itself confer a virtually automatic veto over growth in the Western economies. This fact alone is sufficient to make it a major foreign policy objective of the Soviet Union, despite the fact that Moscow has had no historical ties with the Arabian peninsula comparable to its interest in Iran.

The Soviets have several avenues of approach from which they can pressure the Saudis and potentially undermine their stability. Moscow has a highly reliable but relatively weak ally in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and a considerably stronger but more independent one in Iraq to the north. Both states have expansionist ambitions and claims on neighboring states in the peninsula, and have supported internal opposition groups or separatist movements. Moreover, the Soviets can pose a direct military threat to Saudi Arabia with their airborne forces, particularly in connection with a move against Iran or Western Europe.

But the more likely Soviet approach will be to wait and take advantage of internal instability within the kingdom. As far as we know,

Moscow has no political base of its own within Saudi Arabia, but may not need one. The Mecca incident of November 1979 has severely shaken the confidence of the Saudi royal family and many of their Western backers. If it has not proven the existence of serious revolutionary potential, it has at least undermined the earlier complacency that the Saudis would avoid the social stresses that led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty. Based on what is presently known about internal Saudi politics, neither the monolithic unity of the royal family, nor the loyalty of the national guard, nor the obedience of many of the crucial peripheral tribes can be assumed. The Soviets will benefit from any internal instability in Saudi Arabia, just as they did in Iran, and may be able to achieve some influence with a successor regime by offering it political protection and arms.

III. SOVIET INTERVENTION IN THE GULF

Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia are all potential targets of a Soviet intervention in the next decade. A number of factors have combined to make an intervention in the Gulf much more likely than at any previous time, including the area's fragmentation and political instability, Moscow's expanding horizon of defensive concerns, the vulnerability of the Western alliance system and economic structure to disruption in the Gulf, and the present Soviet advantage in both regional and global military capabilities. Of the four countries, Pakistan is probably in the greatest danger of imminent Soviet attack, although any such intervention will probably be limited in scope and may not involve ground forces. While Iran is in less immediate danger, the threat it faces is much more massive and the potential consequences more serious. Soviet intervention in Iraq or one of the Gulf states presently seems a remote possibility, but may appear much less so in five years, or as a corollary to a move against Iran.

In assessing the likelihood of a Soviet intervention in any one of these states, it is possible to look back at the history of previous Soviet intervention threats in the Middle East for guidance. While such precedents will by no means necessarily govern future behavior, they can provide an analytical framework for understanding why the Soviets may act differently at a later date.

(a) The Historical Pattern of Soviet Intervention Threats

The USSR has intervened or threatened to do so more times in the Middle East than in any other geographical theater. This is *prima facie* evidence of the area's importance to Moscow. The Soviets have carried out actual interventions on two occasions, the first being the dispatch of some 15-20,000 air defense crews, pilots, and technical advisors to Egypt during the 1970 War of Attrition, the second being the December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. On seven occasions (Suez in 1956, the 1957 Syrian-Turkish crisis, Lebanon in 1958, the June and October Arab-Israeli wars, the later phases of the War of Attrition, and the 1978 Iranian revolution), the Soviets threatened to intervene in the course of a Middle Eastern crisis but did not ultimately do so.

Despite the Soviets' apparent and often-stated readiness to project power into the Middle East, in practice they failed to commit significant ground forces to the region until the invasion of Afghanistan. There is evidence suggesting that many of their earlier threats were actually bluffs designed to create the impression of firm support for local clients while in fact avoiding the need for intervention. This can be most clearly established for the Khrushchev-era crises when, as Arab sources have revealed, the Soviets told the Arabs in no uncertain terms that they would not intervene on their behalf. In other instances such as the War of Attrition and the October War, the Soviets backed down after having had their bluff partially called. In all of the pre-1978 cases the Soviets threatened to intervene after the peak of the crisis had passed and a resolution was already in sight. By delaying their threats in this fashion the Soviets minimized the likelihood of actually having to carry them out. All of this suggests a generally cautious approach to the Middle East persisting at least up through the early 70's.[11] The central question to be addressed, then, is whether this earlier pattern of behavior can be expected to continue into the 1980's, or whether Iran and Afghanistan mark major turning points in Soviet willingness to commit forces to the Middle East.

In analyzing the Soviet policy calculus, we can isolate four factors that have tended to restrain Soviet willingness to intervene in the past. The first was the Soviet perception of the balance of long-range stakes in the region. In spite of Moscow's repeated assertions that it had vital security concerns "in an area immediately adjoining its southern frontiers", there is evidence to suggest a general recognition on the part of Soviet leaders that Western interests in the Middle East were more important than their own. The fact that the Soviet economy could survive without Middle Eastern oil whereas the Western economies could not implied that the West would have a greater incentive to go to war over the area. As Khrushchev explained to Nasser in 1958,

> I want you to know what Eden and Bulganin told me when we were in London in 1956. Eden said that if he saw a threat to Britain's oil supplies in the Middle East he would fight. He was talking quite seriously, and what has just happened (i.e., the Anglo-American intervention in Jordan and Lebanon) shows this.[12]

While the West's stake in the Middle East was in part created by economic forces beyond the short-term control of political leaders, the Soviet perception of its importance was reinforced by the long-term commitments they undertook in the region. In this respect the much maligned Baghdad Pact was very effective in convincing the Soviets that the U.S. and Britain were serious about preserving their positions in the area.

The second restraining factor was the overall strategic balance between the U.S. and the USSR. American nuclear superiority in the mid-to-late 50's allowed Washington to threaten escalation as a means of correcting deficiencies in local balances of conventional forces. This served as a powerful restraint on Soviet adventurism in the Middle East. During the 1958 Lebanese crisis, for example, Mohammed Haykal reported the following conversation between Khrushchev and Nasser:

> The Russian leader had told (Nasser) he thought the Americans had gone off their heads and "frankly, we are not ready for a confrontation. We are not ready for World War Three."
> Nasser was asking him for assurances...
> Krushchev (sic) replied that Nasser would have to bend with the storm, there was no other way because Dulles could blow the whole world to pieces...[13]

At the time the Soviets possessed an advantage in local conventional forces over the country being threatened, Turkey, that was at least comparable to the situation presently existing in the Persian Gulf. Fear of nuclear escalation was one consideration preventing the Soviets from taking advantage of this fact.

A third factor was the local balance of forces. The local balance includes both the forces of the regional actors, and those of the superpowers deployable within the theater. Throughout the Arab-Israeli conflict the conventional forces of the USSR and its allies were consistently inferior to those of the U.S. and Israel. The problem was most severe in the 50's, when the Soviets had no way of moving ground forces to the Middle East heartland. During the Suez crisis, Soviet defense minister Marshal Zhukov reportedly told the visiting president of Syria

> "How are we to go to the aid of Egypt? Tell me! Are we supposed to send our armies through Turkey, Iran, and then into Syria and Iraq and on into Israel and so eventually attack the British and French forces?![14]

Even after the formation of the Soviet airborne forces (or VDV) in the mid-60's, intervention was not an attractive military option. Soviet airborne infantry was no match for Israeli armor, and could function only as a tripwire whose effectiveness would depend on Moscow's ability to escalate to a higher level of conflict. This was not easy, since the Sixth Fleet and U.S. forces in Europe could be transferred to the eastern Mediterranean on relatively short notice.

The final factor restraining the Soviets has been a strong short-term American politico-military response in support of Western interests. While the probability and effectiveness of such a response clearly depend on the three previous factors (i.e., the global and theater balances and the relative long-term stakes involved), the demonstration of political willpower or nerve in bringing existing forces to bear has in itself been a crucial determinant of Soviet behavior. This emerges clearly from most fine-grained analyses of Soviet crisis behavior. Moscow has always proven most adventuristic when the United States appeared disinterested or gave positive reassurances that it would not respond. The Soviets encouraged and later failed to restrain the Egyptians during the crisis in May 1967 leading to the June War because of the total lack of U.S. or Israeli response to their initial probes. The climactic Soviet intervention threats in the Suez crisis and the June and October wars came only in support of positions openly advocated by Washington, such as UN ceasefire resolutions restraining Israel. Conversely, the Soviets backed away from their threat to intervene in the October War when the Nixon administration responded with a worldwide nuclear alert, despite the fact that the terms of the ultimatum had not been fully carried out.

The 1970 War of Attrition perhaps best illustrates the importance of short-term U.S. responses in determining Soviet behavior. This conflict is of particular importance insofar as it represents the first Russian intervention in a Middle Eastern crisis--indeed, the only one until Afghanistan.[15] The initial Soviet decision to deploy air defense crews in the interior of Egypt came in late January 1970, in response to an Israeli deep-penetration bombing campaign earlier that month. We now know from inside Arab sources that the Soviets were reluctant

to intervene, and did so only when Nasser threatened to turn to the United States for a political solution.[16] Soviet SA-3 and MiG-21 crews were deployed in the Egyptian interior during March and April 1970. While this represented the first major intervention by Soviet combat forces outside the Warsaw Pact area, it was carefully limited to air defense forces operating within a restricted geographical area in the interior of Egypt. Having deterred the Israeli deep-penetration bombing campaign, the Soviets did not press their advantage but paused for two months in an apparent effort to gauge the U.S. reaction. The signals they received were encouraging: far from opposing the Soviet intervention, the Nixon administration announced the suspension of further aircraft sales to Israel in late March, and resumed pressure on its ally for a political settlement. Thus assured, the Soviets began to expand their operations again in July, when the air defense belt was inched forward towards the Suez Canal. When a ceasefire had been negotiated and was virtually in hand, the Soviets threatened to extend the intervention to the Canal zone in the clear expectation that the war would end before this became necessary. When the Israelis called the Soviet bluff by ambushing and shooting down five MiGs on July 30, the Soviets pulled back from operations over the canal and continued to press the Egyptians to accept the ceasefire. Thus the Soviet intervention in the War of Attrition proceeded in carefully graduated stages which provided Moscow with the opportunity of checking the American response before proceeding. It appears altogether possible that had the United States reacted more strongly to the Soviet presence in March or April 1970, their operations would not have expanded as they did or they might have been compelled to withdraw altogether.

(b) Future Constraints on Soviet Behavior

Of the four factors that have historically served to restrain Soviet adventurism in the Middle East, only one--the relative balance of long-term political stakes--still unequivocally applies to the present-day situation in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the Gulf is probably a good deal more valuable to the West now than it was in the mid-50's, when Britain and France went to war to preserve access to Middle Eastern

oil through the Suez Canal. The overall increase in oil as a percentage of total energy consumed, the post-1969 decline in domestic U.S. production, and the failure of the West to deal with its energy problem since the 1973-74 energy crisis have all contributed to this result. However great the projections for Soviet energy requirements in the 1980's, Moscow's dependence on the Gulf will not begin to approach that of the West at any time in the foreseeable future. We of course do not know the Soviets' subjective perception of their interests in the region. As a concommitant to their present world-power status they have come to demand greater respect for their "legitimate interests" in areas like the Middle East. But on balance it is unlikely they have yet managed to delude themselves that their interests in the Persian Gulf equal or surpass those of the West.

Of course, Soviet judgments as to the balance of relative stakes will differ depending on the country involved. U.S. interests surpass those of the Soviets by the greatest margin in Saudi Arabia, but probably less so in Iran where the Russians have traditionally played a role, or Pakistan where the U.S. commitment has lapsed. In Afghanistan the Soviets clearly believed their own interests were paramount. Iraq is a difficult case to call, since it has been both within the Soviet sphere of influence and a major supplier of oil to Western Europe.

The second factor, the global balance of power, has clearly shifted in the Soviets' favor. From a situation in the mid-50s when the Soviets possessed a vulnerable minimum deterrent against Western Europe, Moscow moved on to acquire an assured second-strike capability by the late 60's and a first-strike capability against U.S. land-based ICBMs in the early 80's. The significance of these developments does not lie in any direct applicability of nuclear weapons to the Gulf, but in the fact that the U.S. is now denied the option of escalation as a means of correcting theater deficiencies. Khrushchev's fears that Dulles would "blow the whole world to pieces" are unlikely to be shared by the present Soviet leadership, which has undertaken a massive weapons buildup to ensure that the Soviet Union will never again be subject to this kind of intimidation.

The United States' loss of a usable margin of nuclear superiority

would not be significant were it not for the enormous imbalance in conventional forces that currently exists in the Persian Gulf. The Soviets, after all, have felt constrained from intervening in the Arab-Israeli conflict long after U.S. threats to escalate lost their credibility in the early 60's. The Soviets' current theater predominance is the result of a number of factors, such as the shift in the locus of the superpower rivalry from the eastern Mediterranean to the Gulf, political realignment on the part of local states, the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and relative spending trends in conventional forces between the U.S. and the USSR since 1964. Israel's substantial military superiority over not only its Arab opponents but over Soviet forces deployable in the area was of inestimable advantage to American interests in containing the Soviet military threat in previous Middle Eastern crises. By contrast, American allies in the Persian Gulf like Saudi Arabia and Oman are weak, internally unstable, and unwilling to accept overt military cooperation with the United States. All of these factors significantly enhance the natural advantages possessed by the Soviet Union as a result of its geographical contiguity to the region.

Finally, the degree to which even the firmest and most clearcut American response will restrain a future Soviet decision to intervene is open to question. Moscow's sensitivity to the risk of war has a great deal to do with its expectations of the likely outcome of that war, which in turn is based on the regional balance of power. No amount of political willpower or commitment on the part of the U.S. can make up for the total absence of military options. For the U.S. response to remain a factor, we would have to assume that the residual American capacity to resist a Soviet attack is sufficient to deter Moscow.

This is by no means impossible: NATO, after all, has never been able to mount a fully credible conventional defense of Western Europe. A conservative Soviet planner making worst case assumptions might anticipate the U.S. being able to introduce sufficient forces into the area to seriously disrupt a Soviet advance, thus raising the costs of the operation substantially. Moreover, the U.S. response need not be limited to the Persian Gulf, but might come in areas of relative strength

such as the eastern Mediterranean or Caribbean. Finally, there is the problem of escalation: while the United States no longer possesses a usable advantage at any level of nuclear warfare, it might be driven to escalate out of sheer desperation. One does not attack a superpower in an area of vital interest without at least risking a broader war, even if this appears to be an irrational response.

We do not know whether these residual capabilities will be sufficient to deter a Soviet intervention over the intermediate term, and recent Soviet behavior is not particularly enlightening on this score. Neither the invasion of Afghanistan nor the warning against U.S. intervention during the Iranian revolution posed the risk of military confrontation with the United States. The Afghan intervention did present the Soviets with risks of a different sort, such as getting caught in a prolonged and costly counterinsurgency campaign on behalf of a regime with virtually no political base. The move jeopardized Soviet relations with much of the Third World, and particularly the Muslim states where Moscow had invested so much political capital over the years. The intervention also had the potential of shocking public opinion in the West and undermining what was left of detente. But significant as these risks were, they did not compare with the risk of a U.S. military reaction, which was never an issue. Afghanistan had been written off by the United States in the mid-50's when Dulles refused to sell Kabul arms. The U.S. administration expressed puzzlement but no serious disapproval at Daud's overthrow by the PDPA in April 1978. In the year preceding the intervention, U.S. officials (who were not paying particular attention to Afghanistan in the first place) did not warn the Soviets or suggest that the U.S. would respond with even the non-military sanctions it finally took. The Soviets could, therefore, proceed with virtually complete assurance that they were not risking confrontation with Washington.

The Soviets also took few risks in issuing a warning against U.S. intervention in Iran. On November 18, 1978, President Brezhnev stated:

> It must be clear that any interference, let alone military intervention in the affairs of Iran--a state which has a common frontier with the Soviet Union--would be regarded by the USSR as a matter affecting its security.[17]

This type of minatory threat has several rather exact precedents, including the Soviet warnings against American overthrow of the newly-formed leftwing Syrian government in 1957 and the republican regime in Iraq in 1958. The actual wording of the statement is extremely imprecise, and does not actually threaten military action. The references to a "common frontier" and "security interests" were used repeatedly in similar warnings from the 50's and 60's.[18] The timing of the threat is again revealing. While the revolution had not run its course, the Soviets could be reasonably sure by late November that no U.S. intervention was likely. Washington's indecisive policy up to that point simply confirmed the Carter administration's almost instinctive aversion to the use of force. After the fact, the Soviets credited themselves with having saved the Iranian revolution; as one commentator stated, "This warning, undoubtedly, played an important part in preventing attempts by the imperialist forces to strangle the Iranian revolution."[19] In fact, Moscow scored a modest and virtually cost-free propaganda victory. This is not to suggest that under all circumstances the Soviets would not intervene in Iran, only that they were not ready to do so in late 1978.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The first and most important conclusion to be drawn from the preceeding analysis of the Soviet intervention calculus is that the United States and its Western allies must increase their capabilities to project power into the Persian Gulf. While we may assert as a matter of historical interpretation that past Soviet threats to intervene in the Middle East have been bluffs, there is too much uncertainty in our ability to determine even past Soviet motives to confidently predict them for the future. We have seen that a sufficient number of factors have changed since the early 70's to cast serious doubt on whether or not the earlier pattern of Soviet restraint will continue. Other unforeseen developments, such as a wholesale change in the risk-taking propensities of the Soviet leadership as a result of the Brezhnev succession, could have different and incalculable effects. While recent events suggest that residual U.S. capabilities may be sufficient to deter Soviet adventurism--and indeed, our collective survival depends on this being the case--it would be foolish to base long-term policy on this assumption.

In addition to creating the physical resources to defend Western interests in the Gulf, the United States must communicate clearly to Moscow its intention to use them if necessary. This should consist both of long-term and short-term elements. Over the long-term it must be made clear that the U.S. feels its vital interests are engaged in the oil-producing regions of the Gulf, and that it is willing to take enormous risks to protect them. Soviet interference in the area would be regarded much as Moscow would regard Western meddling in Poland. This ought to be underlined at every possible encounter with Soviet leaders, and through legal commitments to regional allies. The situation is serious enough to merit a certain amount of bluffing on the part of the United States, including threats to use nuclear weapons: the consequences of being caught in a bluff, after all, are less severe than of losing the Persian Gulf. Over the short run, Washington must reiterate its long-term commitments early and precisely, so that there will be no opportunity for miscalculation on the part of the Soviets.

The June War might have been prevented had the U.S. affirmed its support for freedom of passage through the Straits of Tiran and backed up its position with a show of force. The next time around, we will not have Israel to pull our chestnuts out of the fire.

Our knowledge of the history of Soviet behavior in the Middle East can provide us with some guidance as to the signals to look for which would indicate the seriousness of Soviet intentions. In the past, Soviet bluffs have been characterized by two features. First, the wording of the intervention threat has contained hedges and imprecisions designed to mitigate Moscow's embarrassment in the event the bluff was called. Many have been extremely vivid in implying that the Soviet Union would intervene militarily, but none have stated this unambiguously. Certain stock phrases, such as "the Soviet Union cannot be indifferent to developments affecting its security in a region adjacent to its borders" have been repeated so frequently as to be dismissable from the outset. Second, all Soviet bluffs have been delivered late in the crisis when there was sufficient reason to think that they would not be carried out. The measure of the lateness of a threat is the number of outstanding issues that remain to be resolved at the time it is issued, particularly with regard to U.S. behavior. If in a future crisis in the Gulf the Soviet Union were to make an intervention threat that either was precise in its wording or came early in the conflict (or both), U.S. policymakers should pay particular attention to it and take very seriously the possibility that it was meant sincerely. If on the other hand the warning had the characteristics of the earlier ones, American leaders should not be intimidated or feel constrained in their own behavior for fear of a Soviet reaction.

The latter point can be an extremely important one. A number of observers who have been warning against the growth of Soviet power for a long time now urge a conciliatory posture in the Gulf as a result of Western military weakness there. This attitude can be a potentially dangerous one. It is likely that the structure of a future crisis in the Gulf will be one in which the problem for the U.S. is not to deter the Soviets, but to avoid being deterred by them from doing something that was clearly in Western interests. For example, the United States

may someday feel the need to intervene in Saudi Arabia to preserve a friendly regime there. If the Soviets issued a bluff comparable in content and timing to the Brezhnev statement of November 1978 and the intervention were called off as a result, the Soviets would have won an easy and unnecessary victory. While there are reasons for thinking that Soviet willingness to risk confrontation with the U.S. is increasing, it must be kept in mind that we do not know the degree or seriousness of this change with any certainty. In any event like the one described, underestimating Soviet cautiousness can be every bit as disasterous as overestimating one's own strengths and ability to deter.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Vernon Aspaturian, "Soviet Global Power and the Correlation of Forces," Problems of Communism 19, No. 3, May-June 1980, p. 10.

2. In February 1980 Nikolai Portugalov proposed an international conference on energy by which the Soviet Union would, in effect, undertake to guarantee Western European access to Middle Eastern oil. According to Portugalov, this was a "promising alternative to the adventuristic and hegemonistic policy of the United States in the Persian Gulf region." (TASS, Feb. 29, 1980). The following December a similar proposal was floated by Brezhnev himself.

3. See Ye. Primakov, "Dialectic of Social Development, and Ideological Struggle: Islam and Social Development Processes in Foreign Oriental Countries" in Voprosy Filosofii No. 5, 11 August 1980.

4. Aleksandr Bovin, Nedelya, 3-9 Sept. 1979.

5. Primakov, op. cit.

6. See for example Pravda, Sept. 14 and 16.

7. For a fuller discussion of Pakistani attitudes, see F. Fukuyama, The Security of Pakistan: A Trip Report, The Rand Corporation, 1980.

8. See for example Izvestiia, 12 April 1980.

9. TASS, Sept. 30 1980.

10. One Moscow Radio Peace and Progress broadcast in Arabic to the Middle East asserted that the fate of the Iraqi Ba'th party "will be the same as those who preceeded them, such as Nuri as-Sa'id..." (3 April 1980).

11. See F. Fukuyama, Soviet Threats to Intervene in the Middle East, 1956-73, The Rand Corporation, 1980.

12. Mohamed Haykal, The Sphinx and the Commissar (1978), p. 98.

13. Mohamed Haykal, Nasser: The Cairo Documents (1972), pp. 131-132.

14. Ibid., p. 111.

15. A fuller account of the politics of the War of Attrition is given in Bradford Dismukes and James McConnell, Soviet Naval Diplomacy (1979).

16. See Mohamed Haykal, The Road to Ramadan (1975), p. 82.

17. Quoted in Shahram Chubin, Soviet Policy towards Iran and the Gulf (1980), p. 33.

18. To take just one example, the Soviets issued a statement during the buildup to the Suez campaign in 1956 which read:

> The USSR, as a great power, cannot stand aloof from the Suez question...This is understandable, because any violation of peace in the region of the Near and Middle East cannot but affect the interests of the security of the Soviet State.

Quoted in the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Survey of International Affairs 1956-58 (1962), pp. 229-230.

19. TASS in English, 8 April 1980.


FILMED