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POST-SOVIET STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

A PERSPECTIVE FOR THE 1990S

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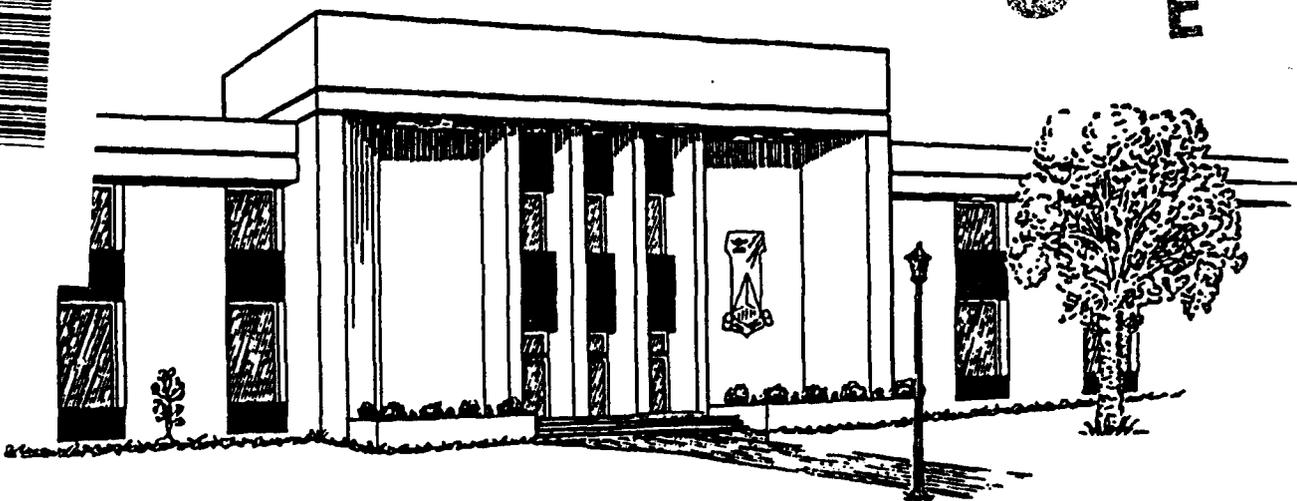
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POST-SOVIET STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
A PERSPECTIVE FOR THE 1990S

by

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A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM
REQUIREMENT

Advisors: Dr. M. Ehsan Ahrari
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MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

April 1992

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: Post-Soviet Strategic Interests in the Middle East: A
Perspective for the 1990s

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The disintegration of the Soviet Union in December, 1991 left analysts pondering the direction of post-Soviet foreign policy. Post-Soviet involvement in the Middle East was particularly ambiguous and remained so through at least the early months of 1992. This paper, written in April, 1992, considers the likely future involvement of a dissolved Soviet Union in the region based upon Russian/Soviet history, ongoing domestic concerns, and foreign policy imperatives, and addresses implications for the United States.

Given the deideologization of post-Soviet policy, the Middle East has lost its compelling interest as an arena for superpower competition. This notable shift in policy, along with the republics' inward focus, means that the CIS will remain largely uninterested in the Middle East and will offer little challenge to US interests in the region. Although the issues of oil and the realignment of the former Central Asian republics will be of interest to the US, they need not be of major concern. In fact, it is critical for the US to resist pressures to view the world through the old Cold War mindset that assumed every world event involving the Soviet Union was potentially damaging to US interests. The real challenge now for US Middle East policymakers is to construct a policy based on mutual American/Soviet interests in the region.

**Post-Soviet Strategic Interests in the Middle East:
A Perspective for the 1990s**

Introduction

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in December, 1991, analysts questioned the direction of its foreign policy. Would Moscow continue to honor agreements that had been negotiated by the Soviet Union? How would it view the world now that communism had been discredited as an ideology? Would some concept as inimical as communism to western interests take its place, or would democratic ideals take hold and find compatibility with western goals? Adding to the complexity of the situation was the fact that Soviet foreign policy had splintered into 15 separate entities. Analysts found themselves nostalgic for the predictable days of monolithic Soviet communism.

In March, 1992, post-Soviet policy toward the Middle East is particularly ambiguous. It is clear the region is no longer an arena for superpower confrontation, a fact that modifies its strategic importance for both Moscow and the West. But it is unclear what priority the region will hold in future post-Soviet and western world views. Moscow, particularly, is reassessing its policy, now that the ideological dimension no longer applies.

At this point, analysts can only speculate as to Soviet policy directions. In light of the volatility of the Middle East and past Soviet involvement there, it is important, nevertheless, to consider potential Russian interests and the likely difficulties the pursuit of those interests may pose for US policy. The questions raised in December concerning foreign

policy in general are particularly applicable to the Middle East, but the issue of greatest concern is the possibility of direct confrontation between a post-Soviet republic, particularly Russia, and the United States.

Although these questions and issues can only be addressed through speculation, there are some clear indicators as to the direction Russian policy may head. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of these indicators, the policies they imply, and their significance for US interests in the region. The methodology includes a review of traditional Soviet interests in the region, a summary of the history of recent Soviet involvement, and analysis of current relevant events.

Traditional Soviet Interests

Soviet policy toward the region must first be addressed in the context of overall foreign policy motivators. These have traditionally been a complex combination of quests for security and, since world War II, a commitment to spread ideology (i.e. play out the superpower ideological confrontation at the regional level). Security has been at the root of all policy, as it is for all nations. In the Soviet case, however, the concern for security has been driven by a paranoia that has resulted from the absence of natural barriers and repeated invasions from the East and West. This paranoia is not hard to understand in light of incursions over the centuries: there were at least 160 foreign invasions between 1228-1462, 10 great wars with Sweden and Poland during the 17th and 18th centuries, the Napoleonic War, the Crimean War, the Russo-Turkish Wars, the Russo-Japanese War,

World War II, and, during the Soviet period, the intervention of the West during the Civil War and the loss of over 20 million people during World War II.¹ The Soviets have sought to ameliorate this sense of insecurity through expansion and military strength. The Cold War policy of aligning as many nations as possible in the Soviet camp can be at least partly understood as an outgrowth of this need for security.

A related traditional interest has been the desire for access to and from the Mediterranean Sea via the Turkish Straits--the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus--in order to reach the Atlantic to the West and the Suez Canal to the Southeast. This access route has been particularly important in light of Russia's lack of warm water ports. In addition to providing an exit route for Russian shipping, it also has been a possible entry point for a hostile fleet into the Black Sea. Control of the waterway, therefore, has had great strategic significance.²

History of Soviet Involvement

Under Stalin, foreign policy interests assumed an ideological mantle. Marxism-Leninism provided the context in which the Soviet Union implemented its foreign policy goals and the filter through which the Soviets viewed their relations with the post-World War II world. Throughout the Cold War, ideology: 1) provided a way to both analyze the international system and measure the progress of the USSR within that system; 2) dictated

¹W. Raymond Duncan, Moscow and the Third World Under Gorbachev (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), p. 16.

²Galia Golan, Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 8.

a world view that perceived events as a subset of a competition between two dominant systems--socialism/communism and capitalism/imperialism--and stressed the primacy of power in this competition; 3) provided a means to legitimize Soviet actions; and 4) justified (with its dialectic approach) a policy that cultivated state-to-state relations on one hand, and support for local communist parties and leftist groups that sought to undermine those same states on the other.³ During this period, the Soviets never subscribed to the concept of the status quo; to them, a failure to advance meant a retreat.⁴ This led to the "zero-sum" approach to superpower competition that assumed a Soviet loss meant an American gain. (The United States approached the competition with the same attitude.)

Stalin's two camp theory (a country was either socialist or capitalist, and the only way to deal with the latter was to work towards its overthrow) was replaced by Khrushchev in 1953 with a three bloc view. He viewed the world as divided into the socialist and capitalist blocs, and the Third World. His policy focused on political support and substantial economic and military aid in an attempt to win over the Third World to communism. Although far from a resounding success, the Soviet position in the Middle East was far better when Khrushchev fell in October 1964 than it had been at the time of Stalin's death. Soviet influence among the Arab states, particularly Egypt, Algeria, Syria, and Iraq had risen, but it was clearly limited.

³Duncan, p. 15.

⁴Robert O. Freedman, Moscow and the Middle East (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 3.

Each of these countries retained independence of action and "tended to extract far more from the Soviet Union in the form of economic and military support than it paid in political obedience."⁵ Furthermore, Iran and Turkey remained firm allies of the United States, although there was some improvement of relations with the Soviet Union.

During the Brezhnev era, 1964-1970, the Soviets targeted the Middle East as the region most likely to yield success in the competition for worldwide power and influence. By the time of Egyptian president Gamal Nasser's death in 1970, the Soviets had managed to improve their position in the region. The USSR had acquired air and naval bases in Egypt, and port rights in Syria, the Sudan, North Yemen, South Yemen, and Iraq. Other than the improved military situation, however, the Soviets seemed to have made little progress. In fact, the Arabs seemed to be getting the better end of the deal. In exchange for Soviet "influence", the Arabs expected loans, weapons, technical advice, diplomatic support, and favorable terms of trade. Furthermore, this influence failed to translate into control over policies in the region. To make matters worse, it appeared that the US might achieve significant gains in the competition for influence through a more evenhanded policy. This included assisting the Arab states in regaining some of the land lost to Israel in 1967.

Soon after the death of Nasser, Soviet influence in the Middle East entered a period of stagnation. The turning point occurred in 1972 when the new president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat,

⁵Ibid., p. 25.

seemed intent on ridding his nation of Soviet influence. He ordered the removal of the 15,000 Soviet advisors from Egypt; the transfer of all Soviet military installations to Egyptian control; and the disposal of all Soviet-controlled military equipment, by either selling it to Egypt or removing it from the country. In 1976, Sadat unilaterally abrogated the Soviet-Egyptian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.

This deterioration in Soviet-Egyptian relations and Egypt's eventual orientation toward the West had a number of negative consequences for Moscow: 1) The Soviets lost a significant military presence in the region. 2) From that point on, until the present, the Soviets were excluded from the Arab-Israeli peace process--particularly in the process started in the wake of the October 1973 war and culminating in the Camp David Agreements of 1978. 3) The absence from Egypt--the key Arab actor in the region--seriously weakened Soviet efforts to counter Arab disunity and to create an organized, pro-Soviet, anti-US Arab position. 4) The Soviets became associated and isolated with the radical states in the region--Syria, Libya, and South Yemen--over which they had no control.

The Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 only seemed to make matters worse. It angered the Arab world and unified it in support of the mujahedin resistance fighters. Partly as a result of the invasion, Moscow was unable to exploit the breakdown of relations between Iran and the US.

The Soviets also were unwilling to provide direct military support to their Arab clients, particularly in confrontations

with Israel, and they failed to respond to Syrian and Libyan requests for assistance in confrontations with Israel in 1982 and the United States in 1986. In addition, the Soviets offered little economic assistance; weapons were the only items of value they had to provide. Finally, Islamic states found nothing appealing in the atheistic Communist ideology.⁶

In summary, during the pre-Gorbachev years, Soviet foreign policy was formulated around the ideological struggle between two world systems. Third World policies were a subset of East-West relations and directly related to Soviet fortunes in the superpower competition. "When the Soviets experienced pressure from the arms race, economic problems on the home front requiring reform, overextended alliance commitments, and negative East-West fallout from Third World conflict...they concentrated on addressing those issues and reduced their expectations of revolutionary change in the developing world."⁷

Gorbachev instituted dramatic changes in Soviet foreign policy that affected Soviet attitudes toward both the West and the Third World. His "new thinking" concluded that Soviet policy had been undermining the nation's economic and strategic priorities. The two camp mentality that had dominated all Soviet thought was replaced with themes of "interdependence, globalism, deideologization of interstate relations, and the need for comprehensive security."⁸

⁶Duncan, p. 118.

⁷Ibid., p. 73

⁸Ibid., p. 76.

"New thinking" was formulated around a necessity to refocus on traditional security concerns that had not been served well by an ideological approach to the world. It was driven primarily by economic imperatives and was based on five principles: 1) The urgent need to revitalize and restructure the Soviet economy (perestroika). 2) The need for a stable international environment conducive to growth of the Soviet economy. This led to the concepts of mutual security (for anyone to feel secure, all must feel secure) and reasonable sufficiency (sufficient military means to defend against attack but not enough to gain victory through aggressive actions). 3) The concept that domestic economic strength and the international system are fundamentally interconnected. This led to a new emphasis on the need for the USSR to work within the international economic system. 4) The concept that political and diplomatic skills were superior to military competition in establishing successful foreign policy. 5) The quest for stable coexistence, which mandated replacing the East-West arms race with a positive approach to political and military relations.⁹

Although Gorbachev believed the communist system merely needed reform, new thinking unleashed new forces that revealed fatal flaws in the foundational principles upon which the system was built. Soviet communism could not survive such exposure. The collapse of the central ideology left the central government devoid of direction and foreign policy in a state of confusion. "Once glasnost and perestroika delivered the coup de grace to

⁹Ibid., pp. 49-52.

Marxism-Leninism as the guiding principle of foreign policy, the Soviet ship of state was left rudderless."¹⁰ Without the ideological base, there was little precedent to guide foreign policy formulation in the future. Gone was the global communist vision that placed every world conflict in the context of East vs. West. New thinking, as it related to foreign policy, meant a reassessment of the fundamental principles upon which the Soviet Union was to base its strategy.

The Gulf War provided the first test of this reassessment and the new approach that stressed basic and enduring security needs and an emphasis on pragmatism rather than ideology. The internal Soviet debate over the War also provided insight into Soviet national priorities and the relative position of the Middle East within those priorities.

The Soviets faced a dilemma in the Gulf War. They had long-standing interests in the region, particularly through associations with Iraq and Syria, and also Libya, South Yemen and Algeria. They saw numerous adverse consequences of abandoning Iraq, and they also struggled with the implications of siding with the West. How would the world view the sudden congruence of Soviet and Western interests? How would it affect Soviet credibility in the Arab world?

The central issue for the Soviets was the extent to which they had to go in acknowledging US influence in the region. It was a bitter pill for a nation that for over half a century had devoted itself to opposing western overtures throughout the

Graham E. Fuller, "Moscow and the Gulf War," Foreign Affairs, Summer 1991, p. 56.

world. Many Soviet hard-liners would not contemplate alliance with American interests, believing that would give the US carte blanche to pursue its own goals in the Gulf. The conservative newspaper Sovetskaia Rossiia stated that Moscow's participation in the coalition "ended the USSR's existence as a superpower."¹¹

Many former Soviet Third World clients saw numerous adverse implications of a world dominated by a single superpower. Saddam Hussein in the spring of 1991 "noted that the eclipse of the USSR as a superpower would for at least a decade lead to a unipolar world, one in which the United States could work its will unhampered on the international scene."¹² Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in March 1990 expressed concern that the world changes would work to the detriment of the Palestinians, and other Arab statesmen stated that Arab strategies for dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict now had to be changed. The view was that the Arab world had lost significant leverage with the United States as Soviet influence waned.

The Soviets, therefore, faced a severe dilemma when Iraq invaded Kuwait. In spite of the Soviet desire to improve relations with the United States and the moderate Arab world, Iraq was not easily cast aside. Arms sales and the thousands of Soviet advisers working in Iraq were a critical source of hard currency. Furthermore, an influential remnant of hard-line thinkers in Moscow believed that Saddam Hussein was "standing up to the imperialists who wanted to dominate Middle East oil and

¹¹Ibid., p. 67.

¹²Ibid., p. 65.

who were building a major military position near the southern border of the USSR, just as Moscow was pulling out of Eastern Europe, thus decisively altering the balance of power against the USSR."¹³

Three other factors also weighed heavily in Moscow's decision concerning the appropriate reaction to Iraq's invasion. First, there was an aversion to overseas military involvement due to an "Afghanistan Syndrome." Second, the domestic economic crisis precluded any major resource commitments. Finally, there was concern over the possible reaction of the Muslims of Soviet Central Asia and Azerbaijan if Soviet military personnel were linked to killing Muslims in Iraq.

As a result of all these considerations, Moscow adopted a mixed strategy: do the minimum necessary to preserve US-Soviet relations and enhance relations with moderate Arab states, and maximize influence with Iraq to the extent possible. An Izvestiya correspondent noted that "the USSR and the United States...acted as allies in the international arena for the first time since World War II," but it was also true that Moscow "consistently delayed action on UN resolutions authorizing the use of force against Iraq,...refused to commit any of its own forces,...and did not immediately move to withdraw its specialists."¹⁴ Moscow, therefore, strove to enact a central tenet of "new thinking" through the emphasis on a peaceful

¹³Robert O. Freedman, : "Moscow and the Gulf War," Problems of Communism, July-August 1991, p. 5

¹⁴Ibid., p. 6.

settlement and a major role for the United Nations, but it also tried to retain some relationship with Iraq.

The results of this strategy were mixed. Moscow did manage to gain diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and billions of dollars of future economic aid from the Gulf Cooperation Council states. The Soviets also appeared to improve their relations with Iran as they coordinated closely during the war in their mediation attempts. On the other hand, the Soviets clearly played a peripheral role, while the United States reinforced its image as the only superpower. Any Soviet aspirations of becoming a dominating influence in the region were quelled for some time to come.¹⁵

This was evident in what should have been a significant event in Soviet relations with the Middle East--the renewal of relations between the USSR and Israel in October 1991. The Soviets had failed to renew relations out of fear of losing the already shaky support of Arab friends in the region. Part of the price the Soviets paid for this was ostracism from the ongoing peace process, which was western-engineered. As long as superpower competition was being played out in the Middle East, the US and Israel were fearful that the Soviets would prove to be spoilers in any peace negotiations. The end of the Cold War brought the disintegration of superpower competition in the region and opened the way for new avenues of cooperation. There was no longer any compelling rationale for the Soviets to refrain from renewing relations with Israel, and there also was no longer

¹⁵Ibid., p. 17

a compelling reason to exclude the Soviets from the peace process. The renewal of relations in October, therefore, made possible Soviet co-sponsorship of peace negotiations between the Arabs and Israelis.

In spite of the symbolic importance of this renewal, the event had little actual significance for any of the major players. The United States remained the superpower with the clout to shape the regional agenda. Some Israeli officials even said at the time that it was debatable who was doing whom the bigger favor by restoring relations.¹⁶ The peace process no longer meant greater Soviet influence and power. On the contrary, it was the weakening of Soviet power that convinced the United States that it could safely and productively accommodate Soviet participation.

It is somewhat ironic that these attempts to broker a peace represented the last significant overture by the Soviet Union to the Middle East. In August, 1991 a coup attempted to overthrow the Gorbachev government, and in December the Soviet Union disbanded. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) grew out of the ashes of the old communist regime, and each republic set its own course.

Soviet foreign policy has since become largely Russian foreign policy, while the remaining republics have been attempting to establish relations with foreign governments in their own right. Soviet foreign policy that focused its

¹⁶Clyde Haberman, "Israel and Soviets Restore Full Relations," The New York Times International, October 19, 1991, p. 5.

attention on the specter of a future world order dominated by the unrestrained employment of US power has been replaced by a Russian policy that is totally preoccupied with its own survival.

Current Policy Status

Confusion seems to characterize current policymaking in Moscow, and, other than a general interest in the peace process, there apparently is no current official Russian policy toward the Middle East. The Russian attache in Cairo said in February 1992 that he is waiting for guidance from his government as to his role and objectives. There have, however, been official Russian statements on foreign policy in general, and Russian authorities have expressed their views concerning the region. These statements provide some indication of the direction policy is likely to head.

Middle Eastern policy that evolves most certainly will be a function of the Russian preoccupation with domestic concerns. Andrei Kozyrev, the Russian Federation Minister of Foreign Affairs, said in January 1992: "The main priority of Russian diplomacy is the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States...Russian diplomacy today sees its main objective as one of helping the Russian people acquire a life worthy of the individual, restoring Russians' pride in their country, and giving them back the opportunity to make full use of the vast potential of the Russian soil's wealth." He added that "Russia does not intend to turn its back on the developing countries...We are by no means abandoning co-participation in efforts to overcome the acute problems faced by this vast group of states.

We must follow through on the timid attempts of the recent past to stop viewing the third world through the prism of ideological struggle." He, however, linked this aid to domestic needs: "The policy of sending a stream of so-called aid to various dictators while our own people lack the most basic necessities can only be called immoral. We will share and help those who truly need and use the resources they receive not to build up their military and police forces, but to promote their countries' social and economic development."¹⁷

This focus on domestic development and international stability was discussed at a recent conference of Russian and Islamic experts sponsored by the Rand Corporation.¹⁸ The conclusion of the conference participants was that Russian behavior in the world will be driven by economic relations and possibly nationalism as expressed in a deideologized foreign policy. Russia's preoccupation with its own problems is a function of its economic crisis, and any meaningful world involvement will not be possible until this crisis is resolved. The most optimistic assessment concerning the time required for the republic to implement market reforms is three to four years; most believe it will take five to eight years. Matching the economic status of Western Europe will require, at best, 40 years; some analysts say 80 years, and some Russians say 100 years.

¹⁷"Russian Foreign Minister Outlines Views," The Current Digest, Vol. XLIV, No. 1 (1992), p. 22

¹⁸Conference information was obtained through a 6 March 92 telephone interview with John Hines of the Phoenix Institute, formerly of the Rand Corporation.

As a result of the economic crisis, the Russians currently see value in continued arms sales to the Middle East. President Boris Yeltsin said in February 1992 that Russia is compelled to continue marketing weapons because arms represent one of the very few sources of hard currency. In the long term, however, the Middle Eastern market may not be very lucrative since most of the nations with substantial funds are affiliated with the West, and they prefer western weapons. Furthermore, as noted by Graham Fuller, "every nation wants to sell arms, but only old thinkers could value Third World ties over those with the West."¹⁹

The consensus at the conference was that Russia will play only on the periphery of Middle Eastern issues. During the Cold War, Soviet interest in the Middle East was related largely to superpower competition and the desire to deny the region's allegiance and, if possible, resources to the West. The Russians have no natural ties to the Middle East, and with the demise of communism, they have lost the primary motive for cultivating allies there. Further, Russia has traditionally viewed non-Slavic peoples with suspicion and even disdain. "Gorbachev himself has always been suspicious of Moslems and Moslem political movements. He never agreed with the Kremlin's intervention in Afghanistan. There is a Russian nationalist current that sees Soviet Moslems as irrational, corrupt, treacherous, and violent."²⁰ It is likely, therefore, that even attempts by countries in the Middle Eastern region, particularly

¹⁹Fuller, p. 73.

²⁰Miron Rezun, Intrigue and War in Southwest Asia. (New York, NY: Praeger, 1992), p. 96.

Iran and Turkey, to woo the former Central Asian republics will not evoke much interest. In fact, Russia will attempt to distance itself from such issues. It will seek to identify itself with the West and define itself out of any Turkish/Arab mold. Conference participants concluded that only two events would likely evoke Russian concern: 1) massive destabilization of the economic environment caused by an event in the region that might produce a drain on Russian resources; or 2) the proliferation of weapons in the region that results in the development of a MRBM capability that might be used against Russian territory.

The conclusions of the Rand conference are debatable, but they are highly plausible. With an economy in shambles, a shaky government seeking direction and strategy, and a demoralized, restive population, Russia will likely remain inwardly focused for some time to come. Only those external events/issues that on the one hand pose a threat or on the other promise assistance will command much attention. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that Russia will be in a position to challenge US interests in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.

There are, however, several issues involving the former USSR and the Middle East that should be of interest to the United States. Two of the more significant are: 1) a potential Russian shortage of oil; and 2) the relations of the former Muslim republics with regional states.

In 1974, the Soviet Union became the world's leading producer of oil as a result of the exploitation of the huge oil

fields in the Western Siberian province of Tyumen. By 1979, the Soviets produced about 11.5 million barrels per day--higher than Saudi Arabian output. Much of the oil was supplied to the Warsaw Pact countries, but the balance was sold to the West for hard currency. By the mid-1980s, however, output of the Tyumen oil fields, which contributed 60 per cent of national oil production, began to decline. The situation is steadily worsening, largely due to the lack of technology necessary to reach the more inaccessible reserves, and has been aggravated by the loss of oil producing republics. Projections indicate that by 1995, the CIS will become a net importer of oil. By the year 2000, it will experience a shortfall of 109.94 metric tons, which will have to be imported.²¹ It is likely that most of this oil will come from the Middle East.

It is possible that the Russians will manage to procure the technology necessary to exploit their vast oil reserves. If current trends continue, however, it appears that Moscow will need to import oil about the time that the US will be importing about 65-70 per cent of its oil, mostly from the Middle East. This simultaneous demand for oil from the same source, along with the likely tightening of oil markets by 1995, could lead to competition, and perhaps confrontation, between Moscow and Washington.²² It would also tempt the suppliers to use oil as leverage in an effort to manipulate the situation and perhaps play one nation against the other.

²¹Mamdouh G. Salameh, "The Soviet Oil Industry in Mid-1991," OPEC Review, Winter 1991, p. 382.

²²Ibid., p. 388.

The second issue, the allegiance of the former Muslim republics, involves six other former Soviet republics: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikstan, and Kyrgyzstan. These states are seeking to define themselves and to determine who their friends and allies should be. Kazak President Nursultan Nazarbayev remarked: "We are looking for stronger ties with the Arab and the Muslim world...since...it is to the Muslim world that we belong..."²³ The realignment of national groupings and the nationalistic struggles within these states may prove destabilizing to the region.

Turkey and Iran are currently engaged in intense competition for the hearts and commerce of the Central Asian republics. Turks are eager to work with these republics to resurrect the vast regional trading area along the route of the ancient Silk road. Turkey was the first country to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, and when the Soviet Union disintegrated in December, 1991, Ankara hosted numerous leaders of the new republics who wanted to establish relations that could offset their dependence on Moscow. Turkey, although Muslim, wants to export its secular approach to government, and this puts it in direct competition with Iran.²⁴

Iran considers its interest in the 60 million Muslims in the Central Asian republics to be "natural and in response to social needs...not out of a desire to buy nuclear bombs but to gain a

²³M.M. Ali, "Soviet Empire's Disintegration Alters the Face of Asia and the Middle East," The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, March 1992, p. 49

²⁴Jim Bodgener, "Capitalising on the Soviet Break-Up," MEED, 14 February 1992, p. 4.

foothold in a mutually beneficial future."²⁵ Tehran not only wants to play a socio/political role, but it also wants to compete economically with Turkey and establish new markets for Iranian oil, gas and food exports. In December, 1991, Iran signed economic and cultural agreements with four of the republics: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikstan, and Kazakstan. Tehran is also interested in forming a future Islamic common market and tried to initiate the process by reviving an old regional economic treaty.

The competition between Turkey and Iran has been most evident thus far in Azerbaijan, which has clearly decided to associate itself with Turkey. President Ayaz Mutalibov of Azerbaijan signed a cooperation and friendship agreement with Turkey in January, 1992, and Turkey agreed to provide Azerbaijan wheat at concessionary prices. Azerbaijan also plans to send army officers to Turkey for training.

Although most of the population in Azerbaijan is Shia, President Mutalibov's antipathy toward Islamic fundamentalism is not a secret. He believes that relations with Iran should be "good-neighborly" but based on "non-interference in domestic affairs".²⁶ Mutalibov nevertheless wants to encourage economic relations with Iran. Azerbaijan, which is a substantial oil producer (244,000 barrels per day at the end of 1990), is now operating its oil refineries at less than 60 per cent capacity. Baku is looking for foreign investment and expertise to reverse

²⁵Peter Feuilherade, "Searching for Economic Synergy," The Middle East, March 1992, p. 33.

²⁶Ibid., p. 33.

the drop in its oil production and apparently agreed to a proposal to refine Iranian oil. It also has agreed to permit the construction of a \$7,500 million pipeline carrying Iranian oil and gas across Azerbaijan to the Ukraine. This would give Tehran a viable alternative to its only export method, that of shipping via tankers through the Gulf.²⁷ At present, this appears to be nothing more than a mutually beneficial arrangement. In light of Tehran's desire to gain a foothold in the Muslim republics, however, it is probable that Tehran will seek further agreements that will enhance Iranian influence.

The current struggle between the Azeris and Armenians in Azerbaijan over the disputed Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh is discouraging potential investment, and the region is anxious to find a solution that will restore stability. Governments of the region, led by Turkey, view a series of regional economic trading blocks to be an ideal solution, and on 3 February, ministers from nine Black Sea littoral states agreed to a Black Sea economic cooperation zone. Six of these states are former Soviet republics. Tehran has also become an active mediator in the dispute, not only due to its desire to enhance its influence but also as a result of security concerns. Iranian Foreign Ministry officials said that Tehran has begun "an active diplomacy to solve regional instabilities" that threaten Iran's national security.²⁸

²⁷Ibid., p. 33.

²⁸"Iran Trying Its Hand at Role Of International Peacemaker", New York Times, 22 March 1991.

Moscow views such overtures by foreign governments with suspicion. Radio Moscow recently commented that while economic cooperation between the former Soviet republics and foreign countries was welcome, "the weak geopolitical balance of the region should not be ignored, because the increased influence of one regional country or another over the newly-formed Central Asian countries will inevitably lead to a clash of interests...It is clear that whoever is willing to cooperate in this region should be careful and prevent the current complicated situation from exploding."²⁹

Conclusion

We are seeing a post-Soviet policy toward the Middle East that is a combination of traditional geopolitical concerns and a new emphasis on economic issues. The Cold War obsession with fashioning the world in a Soviet mold died along with Soviet communism. In its place there is a preoccupation first with Mother Russia along with a revival of tribal and religious loyalties and their divisive effects. Attitudes toward the Middle East are now being driven by these concerns, and the shift in policy has been dramatic. One Russian observer commented: 'Only a few years ago we would have read in the Soviet press, concerning a crisis like the one in the Persian Gulf, stories of the 'revolutionary' overthrow of the antipopulist, monarchist regime in Kuwait. Iraqi actions would have been explained as a step toward consolidation of 'the forces of progress and

²⁹Feuilherade, p. 35.

strengthening of democracy' in the Middle East. Soviet material and military aid to Iraq would surely have been increased."³⁰

No one knows for certain, including, apparently, the Russians what will follow this dramatic shift in policy. Although it is likely the Middle East will play a relatively minor role in future Russian policy formulation, Moscow probably will not remain detached from the region. Moscow will seek to encourage events that may ameliorate its current domestic turmoil and discourage any that might exacerbate the situation. Russia's greatest concern will be stability in the Middle East--both political and economic--and Moscow will seek to achieve it through international trade and cooperation. Russia will also seek a benign relationship with the former Muslim republics, i.e. a relationship that discourages the potential for a confrontation between Muslims and Slavs. Moscow will likely favor, therefore, the development of secular, even western-leaning governments in these republics.

It is difficult to find much in such interests that conflicts with US goals and policy in the region. In the short term, there will be US concern over Russian arms sales and disagreements over arms proliferation policies. In the not-too-distant future, there may be competition over oil access. In the long term, Russia may again seek dominance in the region as a result of historical ambitions driven by geography and security concerns. Moscow will naturally encourage events that are favorable to Russian interests. But until Moscow regains the

Catiana V. Nosenko, "Soviet Policy in the Persian Gulf," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Winter 1991, p. 74.

influence, and some would argue even the military capability, to shape events in the region, it will be in Russia's best interests to foster a stable environment that poses no threat and allows Russia the option of approaching the region with benign neglect.

In sum, post-Soviet foreign policy will evolve around several imperatives: the traditional concern over the protection of borders from potential aggressors (i.e. China, Japan and Germany); enhancing relations with those states that can assist economically and technologically; fostering amicable relations with Muslim border states that can affect stability; and maintaining an "independent" foreign policy that seeks diplomatic involvement in international issues.³¹

Moscow will undoubtedly continue to press for some type of inclusion in Middle Eastern peace negotiations. This may at times prove irritating to Washington, especially when it appears directed at blunting US predominance.³² Russian influence, however, need not be detrimental to US interests. There is a danger that the US proclivity to view the world in zero sum terms, to view every world event in terms of winners and losers, and to seek an "evil empire" in every regional dispute will lead to worst case assumptions and inappropriate US involvement. Even Russian activity that appears destabilizing may be the natural consequence of the transition from the Cold War status quo to a new world order. The US, rather than becoming embroiled in regional turmoil, should remain on the periphery and acknowledge

³¹Fuller, p. 74.

³²Ibid., p. 75.

the inevitability of friction in relations between states. The post-Cold War world is a far more complex place, with a diversity of challenges that no one nation can possibly address, let alone resolve.

All of this has several important implications for US policy in the Middle East. First and foremost, the United States, unencumbered by Cold War concerns, now has an opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive. The perceived necessity for one superpower to react to the moves of the other no longer exists. The US is free to fashion a creative policy focused on the unique culture, history, needs and power balances of the region. The region no longer need be viewed as an appendage to a greater superpower agenda.

A viable US policy for the region should now include at least three major elements: 1) a political element that seeks active interchange with all governments in the region (including those of Syria, Iran, and Iraq); 2) an economic element that reexamines all forms of US assistance and earmarking and seeks to construct post Cold War programs that focus on stability of the region and not superpower competition; and 3) a military element that seeks to enhance interaction, exchange, and training programs in order to inspire further mutual trust. In addition, there may now be mutual benefits to be gained by including Russia in the formulation of such a policy.

This latter point deserves serious consideration. There is the distinct possibility that the most significant post-Cold War development in the Middle East could be the congruence of East-

West interests. While welcome, this poses a new dilemma for the United States in the region: how to fashion a policy that incorporates mutual American/Russian interests in stability and peace. The opportunity now exists for the US to capitalize on Russia's geographic and historical integration in the region and co-opt rather than exclude them from policy formulation. The US response to this dilemma/opportunity will indicate the degree to which Washington is willing to put aside the Cold War paradigm and include Moscow in leadership of the post-Cold War world.

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