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**SOVIET STRATEGY IN
SOUTHWEST ASIA AND
THE PERSIAN GULF REGION**

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Since the mid-1950s, when Nikita Khrushchev initiated a policy of expanded involvement in the Third World, the region of Southwest Asia comprised of Afghanistan and Iran, has been high on the list of Soviet regional priorities. The strategic location of the area—adjacent to the southern boundaries of the USSR as well as the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region—and the Soviet concern about the concentration of U S political and military influence in the entire area have been among the most important long-term determinants of Soviet policy. During the past two decades concerns about the possible extension of Chinese influence into the region, as well as the critical importance of Persian Gulf petroleum resources for the OECD nations have added to the attractiveness of this part of the world for Soviet meddling, or at least influence-peddling. 1

The corollary of the Soviet attempt to preclude the establishment of influence in the region by one of the two major opponents of the USSR has been the desire to create a Soviet-oriented grouping of states. The unsuccessful attempts in the late 1960s and early 1970s to generate support for an Asian collective security system centered on Moscow provided evidence of this objective. In addition to the broad goal of a Soviet-oriented bloc of states along the southern borders of the USSR, Soviet leaders have also been interested in military-security and economic benefits that they might gain from closer contact with the countries of the region. Until the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in late 1979, however, the Soviets had made little headway in turning their economic, military and political involvement into an active military presence similar to what they were able to acquire in places such as Egypt (until 1972), Somalia (until 1977) and elsewhere in Africa and Asia.

Overall, Soviet policy in Southwest Asia and the Gulf region has been an integral part of Soviet activities in the Third World more generally and has, over time, been closely related to Soviet initiatives in the Middle East and

other portions of Asia. The primary motivating factor in Soviet policy has been the global competition with the United States and its allies and the desire to strengthen the overall security capabilities of the Soviet state, while at the same time undermining the long-term interests of the Western states.

A Soviets Aim in Afghanistan

The primary objectives of Soviet support for the communist Saur Revolution of April 1978 and of the invasion of late December 1979, which occurred after the Taraki and Amin regimes had proven incapable of generating even the most modest popular support for their brand of communist revolution, concerned the maintenance and strengthening of Soviet influence--even control--in a country considered of vital importance for long-term Soviet interests.² Although such factors as the strategic benefits to be obtained by the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan could not have been ignored by those in the Kremlin who made the crucial decisions that culminated in the occupation of Afghanistan by a Soviet military force that now totals over one hundred thousand troops, the major factors that resulted in this decision were related to the fear that an anti-Soviet regime might come to power in Afghanistan and eventually provide the United States with opportunities for influence in the region.

It is true--and obviously of major significance for the interests of the United States and its allies--that one of the consequences of the Soviet invasion the extension of Soviet military power closer to the oilfields of the Gulf. The continuing Soviet effort to consolidate its military and political domination in Afghanistan has also been coupled with diplomatic efforts aimed at "normalizing" relations with a number of the important Gulf States, most importantly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Current Soviet policy in Afghanistan is oriented--as was Soviet policy in Eastern Europe in the post-1945 period--toward the creation of a stable communist regime dependent upon and dominated by the USSR. Such a regime would provide Moscow with a number of visible benefits. First of all, the possibility of the rise of a hostile Afghan government allied with China or the West on the southern borders of the Soviet Union would be eliminated. Closely related to this is the fact that a stable, communist Afghanistan would provide the USSR with an effective buffer in the south and, moreover, would provide opportunities for influencing governments in the region--in particular those of Pakistan, Iran, and other Gulf states. Other factors that favor the continued Soviet efforts to "pacify" Afghanistan as a dependent communist state include the successful experience of the pacification of Central Asia by the Soviet government in the 1920s, commitments to the Afghan communist party--the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)--and the unwillingness of the Soviet leadership to back down on such commitments, and the evidence that the successful creation of a communist regime in Afghanistan would provide for the continuing vitality of the claimed inevitability of Marxism-Leninism as the single global social system of the future.

Although the Soviets have been sporadically involved in U N -sponsored negotiations concerning the future of Afghanistan, it is clear that no successful agreement can be expected to emanate from these talks that would result in a Soviet military withdrawal and the establishment of a truly autonomous Afghan government. The major escalation of Soviet military operations in Afghanistan during the course of the past year and a half provide clear evidence that the Soviets are in Afghanistan to stay and that they are willing to expend the resources necessary to remain

The costs that the Soviets have incurred in Afghanistan during the course of more than five years of military occupation have been quite high, but definitely not of an order that would result in a reconsideration of basic Soviet policy. From Moscow's perspective the inevitability of the collapse of the PDPA regime in Kabul, were Soviet troops to be withdrawn, would bring with it costs far higher than those of continuing the military occupation and "pacification" of the country. Although Soviet casualties have risen during the past two years as the level of fighting has escalated, they continue to remain relatively low. Given the nature of the domestic political system in the USSR, costs (including military casualties) will not result in widespread political pressures that favor withdrawal.

The financial costs of the occupation are much more difficult to measure than even the military losses. Yet even here the cost involved in housing Soviet troops in Afghanistan and of conducting military operations are covered, in part, by planned expenditures for housing and training maneuvers that would have been necessary even without the invasion and occupation. Although the initial political costs of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan were high—almost universal condemnation of the Soviet action, even among friendly states—they have had little concrete impact on longer-term Soviet relations with the outside world. With a few exceptions—e.g., the U.S. and Japanese partial economic embargoes—the external response to the USSR was largely verbal and was not translated into concrete actions.

In sum, there is little evidence that the Soviets will consider leaving Afghanistan in the foreseeable future, nor that the mujahideen who are carrying out the resistance to Soviet domination will be able to defeat them. From the perspective of the Kremlin the stakes in Afghanistan are high—the establishment

of a stable and dependent ally along the southern Soviet frontier, the extension of Soviet military power into a region of strategic importance for both the Soviet Union and the West, and the expanded possibilities for extending Soviet influence into the Persian Gulf region—while the costs are tolerable. Although the prospects for a rapid pacification of Afghanistan are bleak—even more than five years after the initial Soviet invasion—the Soviets will continue indefinitely to accept the costs involved in the occupation of that country in the expectation of gradually wearing down and defeating the opponents of the Soviet-installed Babrak regime.

B The Soviet Union and the Persian Gulf

Although the Soviets have extended their military capabilities in Southwest Asia as a result of the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan—a factor which enhances the potential for expanding role in the Persian Gulf region—they have yet to be able to employ those capabilities effectively as an instrument of influence in the key Gulf states.³ Before turning to a fuller discussion of Soviet efforts to establish a presence and extend influence in the region it is important to examine, albeit briefly, the importance of the Gulf for the interests of the United States and its Japanese and European allies.

Unlike U S interest in Western Europe, which stems from longstanding links of culture and history and more recent concerns about markets, U S interests in the Gulf result from more recent and limited objectives. Here the U S is primarily interested in ensuring continued access to the petroleum resources of the region and in the markets for industrial and agricultural exports which have been created through oil revenues.⁴

The major interest that Western Europe, Japan and the other non-communist

states of East Asia share with the United States in the Persian Gulf are twofold first, an uninterrupted access to the petroleum reserves of the region and, second, access to the markets Given these interests, the key question that arises is how they may be undermined if the Soviet Union were to make encroachments in the direction of the Gulf Broadly speaking, there are two dominant schools of thought about Soviet interests in the Persian Gulf One view holds that the Soviet Union is interested in expanding towards the Gulf as part of the historic Russian drive to acquire warm-water ports This view is perhaps best expressed by W Scott Thompson, who argues

My working assumption is that it is basic Soviet strategy to reach the warm waters of the Indian Ocean There need be no "master plan" for this assumption to be seen as reasonable Moscow would understandably like to break out of what, at one period, it surely saw as its encirclement Its cultivation of good relations with India, its occupations of parts of Iran thrice in this century, its invasion of Afghanistan, its treaty of friendship with Iraq, and its attempts to be the balancer in the Iran-Iraq war are all, in part, manifestations of this general expansionist desire 5

It is important to note that analysts such as Thompson, who see the Soviets seeking to expand their horizons in the direction of the Gulf, also see a generally expansionist drive underlying all of Soviet foreign policy In contrast to the view taken by Thompson we find a markedly divergent view of Soviet interests and objectives expressed by other scholars working on Soviet policy in the region For example, as R D McLaurin has written

The Persian Gulf has not, however, been a Soviet neighbor, either recently or in the distant past The Gulf was of virtually no importance to Russia for centuries Where would Russian warm-water ports in the Gulf have traded? And with what? Russia's internal lines of communication in areas closest to the Gulf were not highly developed Certainly a Russian naval force permanently stationed in the Gulf was unthinkable but would not

have been unsinkable the Strait of Hornuz would have left such a fleet bottled up, without logistic support, and cut off from major bodies of water ⁶

The approach that we adopt in assessing Soviet interests and objectives in the region of the Persian Gulf falls in between the two views spelled out above. We believe that the Soviets have multiple goals in the region and are not necessarily on an inexorably expansionist path towards the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. What, then, are the Soviet interests in the region? In our view, they are the following (not necessarily in a sequential or a hierarchical order), first, to the extent possible, reducing Western influence, in particular that of the United States, in the area, second, and obversely, expanding Soviet influence in the region, third, obtaining access to the resources of the region through the presence of friendly governments (which are preferably also at least professedly Marxists), and fourth and finally, ensuring their security interests. It is obvious that our enumeration of Soviet interests and objectives suggests that they are intrinsically linked with one another and can only be separated for analytical purposes. For example, if the Soviets succeed in ensuring that a particular state or set of states have regimes that are not hostile to their interests and keep their distance from the West other Soviet concerns (such as security interests) would probably also be enhanced.

Without harkening back to the days of Peter the Great we can find more recent traces of Soviet interest in the Gulf in the Iranian-Soviet treaty of 1921, a particular provision of which stated that

if a third party should attempt to carry out a policy of usurpation by means of armed intervention in Persia, or if such a power should desire to use Persian territory as a case for the operations against the Russian Socialist Federal Republic, or if a foreign power should threaten the frontiers of the Russian

Socialist Federal Republic, or those of its allies, and if the Persian Government should not be able to put a stop to such a menace after having been once called upon to do so by the Russian Federal Socialist Republic, the Russian Socialist Federal Socialist Republic shall have the right to advance its troops into the Persian interior for the purpose of carrying out the military operations necessary for its defense ⁷

On the basis of this provision in the treaty the Soviets justified the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran in 1941. However, even with the conclusion of the war the Soviets were most unwilling to leave the northern portions of Iran, most particularly the region known as Azerbaijan. Here the Soviets relied on the organizational abilities of the new premier, Quavam, a man who was believed to have pro-Soviet sympathies. Through his help the Soviets hoped to obtain a toehold in the region, specifically by obtaining an oil concession. Owing to a mixture of a vigorous U S response and the opposition of the local populace, the Soviets had to quietly withdraw after obtaining an agreement with the Iranians on the creation of the a Soviet-Iranian oil company. This, however, proved to be a Pyrrhic victory, for the Iranian parliament refused to ratify the agreement ⁸. Soviet influence continued to wane in the area and Iran in particular, through the 1950s as the United States increasingly made inroads into this region. Specifically, in Iran the government of Mohammed Mossadegh was overthrown with some support from the CIA when he nationalized the foreign oil companies ⁹. More broadly, the United States succeeded in establishing an entire network of military alliances, including SEATO and CENTO, which sought to contain the extension of Soviet power from the Far East to the Middle East. Although these alliances would eventually unravel because differences among their members proved to be greater than the fear of a common enemy, from the Soviet standpoint they represented a form of encirclement. One of the primary

goals of Soviet policy from the mid-1950s on was the dissolution of these U S -centered alliances. In fact, even prior to the consolidation of the alliance system the Soviets initiated major efforts to break through this network.

C Soviet Relations with Persian Gulf States

The first inroads that the Soviets made into the Middle East were through their support of Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt and the various governments that ruled Syria in the 1950s. The growing Soviet role in the region was not made possible through any ideological convergence of the views of the Soviets and their new-found Arab friends, but rather because the Soviets were willing to provide the Arab states with military support in their struggle against Israel and began to provide substantial amounts of development capital for the construction of projects viewed as important by the Arab leaders—e g , the Aswan High Dam in Egypt. What influence the Soviets were able to garner in the Middle East in the late 1950s remained confined to the northern and western section of the region and did not extend into the resource-rich Persian Gulf area. In fact, not until a coup in Iraq in 1958 removed the pro-Western government were the Soviets provided with their initial opportunity to establish contacts with one of the Persian Gulf states. In the wake of the coup that brought Qasim to power Iraq withdrew from Baghdad Pact and also annulled the 1955 Anglo-Iraqi treaty. Despite the anti-Western character of the new Iraqi regime, the Soviets quickly realized that the Iraqi communists were not to be permitted to operate openly and instructed them to subordinate their interests to those of a strong, nationalistic ruler. While the Soviets were none too happy with Qasim's domestic policies, they nevertheless continued to support

him both with economic and military aid ¹⁰ This Soviet willingness to sacrifice ideological goals to achieve other interests (in this case the denial of Western influence) was hardly exceptional, for the Soviets have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to overlook the ideological coloration of many of their prospective clients, in order to promote goals deemed to be more compelling

This pragmatism paid off, and with the Ba'ath coup in 1963 the Soviets were able to improve their standing in Iraq. The major boost to Soviet interests, however, came in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict when Iraq broke its ties with a number of Western states, notably the United States, the United Kingdom and West Germany. It is important to point out, lest we make the wrong inference, that while the breaking of diplomatic relations with the Western nations redounded to the benefit of the Soviets, the underlying reasons for the break had little to do with Soviet influence in Iraqi politics. Thus, it was the convergence of interests that served to bring the Iraqis and the Soviets together, rather than the Soviet ability to make Iraq carry out its dictates. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, as the Iraqis sought to expand their influence in the Persian Gulf (particularly after Nasser's death in 1970), they found further common ground with the Soviets. It was about this time that the Soviets had begun to question the utility of providing foreign aid and were increasingly relying on arms sales ¹¹ This shift in policy coincided with Iraqi needs, particularly in light of the fact that the Iraqis had severed relations with the Western nations, except France, which were in the position to supply them with arms. Furthermore, owing to its intransigence towards the Western states, Iraq encountered various difficulties with the Western oil companies. This growing conflict, in turn, provided the Soviets with the opportunity to provide the Iraqis with technical help for their petroleum

industry. This help, however, did not come without cost. As we have already noted, the Soviets had lost their earlier penchant for dispensing economic aid and now were increasingly tying technical assistance and weapons sales to the objective of meeting their own economic needs. Thus, while they provided oil drilling equipment to the Iraqis, they simultaneously succeeded in reaching an agreement with them for the sale of crude oil.¹² The convergence of interests of the two sides culminated in the signing of a treaty of friendship and cooperation in 1972. This treaty, which was similar to another signed by the Soviets with the Egyptians about a year earlier, called for each side not to enter into any alliances which would be inimical to the interests of the other. Also, as the Indo-Soviet treaty of 1971, it called for the two parties to contact each other "in the event of the development of situations spelling a danger to the peace of either party or creating a danger to the peace." While Iraqi-Soviet economic relations expanded after the signing of this treaty, the Iraqis nevertheless sought to maintain their freedom of action. Later that year President Saddam Hussein made a trip to France where he signed a ten-year agreement with the French oil firm CFP, under which the Iraqis agreed to sell close to 25% of the production of their nationalized oil fields.¹³ During the following decade, despite the involvement of the Soviets in the Iraqi oil industry, particularly after the oil embargo of 1973, and the continued sale of weaponry to Iraq (both to satisfy its regional aspirations and to curb the activities of the Kurdish rebels), their ability to influence Iraqi foreign policy remained limited. Thus, despite Soviet pressure to endorse various peace plans for the Middle East, the Iraqis remained aloof. Furthermore, after initial collaboration with domestic communists, Saddam Hussein dealt with them in a rather ruthless fashion and, though Moscow protested, it appeared unable to

do much to change Hussein's behavior

If the Soviets fared none-too-well in their relations with a Gulf state widely considered to be a quasi-client state, how has it fared with other states in the Gulf since its initial forays? Moscow's interest in the two Yemeni Republics became evident in the early 1960s. Following the military coup in North Yemen in 1962 the Soviets sought to maintain their early friendly relations with the strategically-located state. By 1964 they had signed a treaty of friendship and economic and technical cooperation which provided the Yemenis a loan of 65 million rubles.¹⁴ Soviet activities in North Yemen continued to expand until the overthrow of President Sallal in 1967 and the withdrawal of Egyptian troops after the June war. This led to direct Soviet military involvement on behalf of the republican regime, but the Soviets were inhibited from expanding their military role in the conflict after U.S. warnings to refrain from such activity.¹⁵ As the civil war dragged on, the military rulers who had overthrown President Sallal sought to reduce their dependence on the USSR and made overtures towards the West and the Saudis. About the same time border clashes broke out with South Yemen, and the Soviets tilted towards the latter with whom they had become involved following the departure of the British in 1967. Yet the Soviets were unwilling to forego completely the investment that they had made in North Yemen and attempted to maintain ties with both countries.

Ultimately it was in South Yemen that the Soviets did succeed in establishing a firm toehold. The reasons for the Soviet success in this country were twofold. First, the regime that replaced British rule was radical/leftist in character and was also desperately in need of resources for the purposes of economic development. These two factors gave the Soviets the opportunity of

making headway into this underdeveloped nation. The major payoffs that have accrued to the Soviets from their investments in South Yemen include access to air and naval facilities, particularly in Aden.¹⁶ Furthermore, owing to its cordial relations with South Yemen the USSR was able to provide support for the Dhofari rebellion in Oman.¹⁷

While its investments in South Yemen have yielded rich dividends, the Soviets have suffered serious setbacks in their attempts to extend their influence in other parts of the region. We have already discussed the Soviet role in Iraq through the 1970s and have also alluded to the early interest that they displayed in its major adversary, Iran. Despite the long-standing interest in Iran and certain cooperative arrangements that they worked out with the Shah, the Soviets have been markedly unsuccessful in obtaining any degree of long-term influence or leverage over Iran's foreign or domestic policies. While they may take delight and derive comfort from Ayatollah Khomeini's description of the United States as "the Great Satan," they are also acutely cognizant that the Iranian leadership is hardly sympathetic to their interests in the region. Also, contrary to popular belief that the Soviets stand to gain from the revolutionary pronouncements and oracles of the Iranian regime, we would argue that in all likelihood the Soviets have much to fear from the brand of revolution that the Ayatollah and his followers are interested in fomenting. Thus, while cautious about criticizing Khomeini directly, the Soviets have not remained silent about the Khomeini regime's attempts to muzzle the pro-Moscow, Tudeh Party. As a Soviet commentator writing in Pravda stated

About two years ago the Tudeh headquarters in Teheran was seized and destroyed. Then the Party's newspaper and publishing houses were closed down and their employees were thrown in prison. Now, judging from the reports coming from different

parts of Iran, Tudeh party members and supporters have been arrested in many provinces. Thus, an open crusade has begun against one of the oldest political parties, one that represents the leftist and most progressive wing of the Iranian Revolution.

Later in the same article he went on to add

History teaches us that a blow to patriots, no matter what the pretext, ultimately turns into a blow to the revolution itself. It's not too late to stop this judicial spectacle that is being prepared on the basis of false unsubstantiated charges and discredit the slogan "Death to the Tudehists" that has sprung up in Teheran. There is no question that solidarity and cooperation among all patriotic and democratic forces are in the interests of the Iranian people and their anti-imperialist struggle. 18

The Soviet's willingness to criticize the suppression of the Tudeh party stems less from concern for the plight of the party (they remained silent when the Shah's SAVAK, the dreaded Iranian internal security force, wreaked havoc on the Tudeh and its members) than a simple recognition that they have little to lose by criticizing Iran. In a very clear sense it demonstrates the low ebb of the Soviet position in Iran. This situation is obviously of some concern to the Soviets, who were early in recognizing the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. Indeed, one can support this conclusion by examining the response to the Iran-Iraq war, as expressed in the Soviet media. While the Soviets have increasingly moved towards supporting Iraq in the conflict, they have sought to behave in such a fashion that they do not entirely vitiate their relations with the Iranians. Again statements in the Soviet press provide the best indication of this attempt to hedge their bets. For example in late 1983 a Pravda commentator stated

One cannot help but note that Iran's pursuit of the war "to a victorious conclusion" entails the stirring up of chauvinistic

attitudes The principles and goals of the antimonarchical revolution in Iran are being consigned to oblivion, and those defending those principles and demanding that they be put into practice are being persecuted In other words, a purge of the truly patriotic, revolutionary and democratic elements is under way

Meanwhile, the Iranian-Iraqi conflict has become a feeding trough for the monopolies that supply the weapons These are being supplied to the two sides by both fair and foul means Everything is being done to prolong a war that is providing fabulous profits to the death merchants 19

While clearly more critical of the Iranians, the criticism is not particularly strident in nature, and a substantial portion of the blame for the prolongation of the conflict is squarely laid at the feet of the "monopolies that supply the weapons " (It is pertinent to note that the Soviets themselves have not been averse to providing weapons to the Iraqis during the course of the conflict) Yet, despite their supplier relationship with Iraq, they have not been able to put pressure on the Iraqis to bring an end to the protracted war Nor can this war be seen as serving their interests, because as long as the conflict persists it means the possibility of the interruption of oil supplies from Iraq and, worse, still the possibility of U S intervention in the region The latter possibility is of considerable concern to the Soviets, as can be deduced from commentaries in the Soviet press In an article entitled, "Who Is Muddying The Water In The Persian Gulf," A Qm1n stated

The aggravation of the situation in the Persian Gulf is seen as a convenient reason to "expand the range of US activities in the Middle East " In strengthening its military presence, the US is bringing large contingents of naval forces into the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf It is reported, in particular, that an American naval unit consisting of the aircraft carrier Ranger, and 2000 Marines has been moved to the region According to other accounts, the American aircraft carrier Enterprise has been sent there A number of American officials confirm that Washington stands by the intention it voiced three years ago to resort to military measures, if necessary, to safeguard regular oil

shipments to the West from the region 20

From the above it is easy to discern that the Soviets do have a clear notion that the United States remains committed to maintaining access to the petroleum resources of the Persian Gulf and is quite willing and ready to use force to ensure such access

While unwilling to confront the United States directly, the Soviets are nevertheless seeking to expand their influence in the region—though, as we have noted, their success has been quite limited. One key state which they would like to court (or even help engineer an overthrow of its regime) is Saudi Arabia. At the time of writing the Soviets have no diplomatic relations with the Saudis and it appears unlikely that such a diplomatic breakthrough is on the horizon. The Saudi regime is a conservative monarchy and is intransigent towards atheistic Communism. It has also banned the communist party in the country, thereby denying the Soviets the opportunity of resorting to a form of informal penetration. Furthermore, the Saudis, in tacit cooperation with the United States, serve as a bulwark against revolution in the Persian Gulf. Given the nature of their regime, they are extremely concerned about revolutionary movements, whether they are of a secular or a religious character.

Apart from Saudi Arabia, the only remaining actor of any significance in the Gulf is Kuwait. Recently the Soviets established formal diplomatic ties with Kuwait, a country which they had viewed as independent in name only, at the time of its independence from the United Kingdom. Kuwait has sought to pursue a delicate foreign policy stance, refusing to align itself with either superpower. It has criticized the U.S.-sponsored Rapid Deployment Force and also the installation of American bases in the Persian Gulf. And, while commending the

Soviet stand on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Kuwaitis have also made clear to the Soviets that they wish to minimize superpower intrusion into the Gulf 21
Thus far they have been reasonably successful in this strategy

Our discussion of Soviet interests in and overtures towards the Gulf would be incomplete without some discussion of the recently formed Gulf Cooperation Council. The idea of developing some form of collective security arrangement in the Gulf was first made public shortly after the Iranian revolution, when the first proposal for such an arrangement was launched by Oman in 1979. The Omanis proposed that an international Western force be brought in to conduct surveillance in the Gulf and that this surveillance be coordinated with a multinational ground force drawn from the participating Gulf states. The object of this force was to counter possible threats from the Iranian regime. This proposal met with opposition from Iraq and Saudi Arabia, although the Saudis offered the Omanis financial assistance to purchase weaponry 22

Interest in this form of collective security arrangement surfaced once again in 1981 with the onset of the Iran-Iraq war. This time the suggestion came from the Saudis, who proposed it at the Third Islamic Conference in 1981. The Council was formed in February 1981 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and was composed of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Though Iraq and the two Yemens were interested in being included in the Council, they were not allowed to join. The Iraqis were kept out for two reasons. First, they were embroiled in a war with Iran and would of necessity drag the other members of the newly-formed Council into the war in one fashion or other. Second, the Kuwaitis were concerned about Iraqi participation in Council because the Iraqis had at least two outstanding territorial disputes with them 23

The Omanis once again sought to raise the possibility of U S cooperation with the Gulf Council, but were opposed by the Saudis. The Saudi opposition to direct U S involvement in the region arose less from any aversion to the United States (apart from the fundamental issue of the U S support for Israel) than from a fear of offending and incurring the wrath of Moscow. However, despite the best efforts of the Saudis in attempting to avoid Moscow's displeasure, the Soviets expressed their unhappiness with the Council. The major reasons for the Soviet displeasure appeared to be their view that the Council would play into the hands of the United States, despite its professions to the contrary. As a commentator writing in Pravda cautioned

The desire of the group of neighboring oil extracting and exporting countries to expand economic cooperation in the region is fully understandable. During the conference, however, attention was paid not so much to this question as to the coordination and even the possible pooling of efforts in the military sphere. Referring to the 'need to defend' sea routes for oil transportation, the representative of the Oman regime proposed creating a joint naval fleet to "protect" the Strait of Hormuz. Riyadh advanced a broader initiative of "unifying the military potential" of the six Near East countries. The Saudi plan presented to the conference said that this would enable the Persian Gulf countries "to ensure security in the region without external interference." In itself regional cooperation can be useful. Attempts to push it into a military course under U S auspices can in no way serve to stabilize the situation in the Persian Gulf region or the Arab peoples' interests. 24

Soviet anxiety about the Gulf Cooperation Council's possible pro-U S orientation reveals the degree of Soviet concern about the likelihood of expanding U S influence in the region, despite the major U S setback with the fall of the Shah of Iran and the emergence of the intransigent Khomeini regime. Two interlinked inferences can be made about the Soviet reactions to this feeble and fragmented attempt at developing a collective security arrangement in the

Gulf First, the Soviets fear that, if the Gulf states can indeed succeed in limiting the influence of the superpowers in the region, their own interests are bound to suffer. Thus, while they do not stand to gain from overt hostility (such as the protracted Iran-Iraq war), they are not averse to preventing any movement that leads to greater cohesion and collaboration by a group of essentially conservative states. Second, they are more concerned that this collaboration might lead to an invitation to the United States to enter the region. This explains the particular wrath of the Soviets for the Qmani proposals to include the United States in a regional security arrangement.

In Lieu of Conclusions

Given our analysis of Soviet behavior in the Gulf, we can contend that it do not pose an immediate danger to the interests of the West. Indeed it appears to us that the major immediate problems in the Gulf stem less from Soviet intrusions or possible Soviet interference with oil supplies than from the likelihood of instability emanating from regional conflicts and from the internal structure of the regimes in the area. Though we have not discussed regimed structures in any extensive fashion in this paper, we have alluded to the fundamentally unrepresentative character of most of the regimes in the region. As these societies undergo modernization (brought about through petroluem-fueled development) many of the primordial ties of clan, tribe and family will break down--thereby giving rise to the possibility of domestic instability. One witnessed this to a degree in the Shah's Iran, where the changes brought about by industrialization, along with many resultant social and economic inequities coupled with the repressive nature of his rule, gave rise to fundamentalist Islam. Owing to the nature of the Saudi regime (despite the fact that its citizens enjoy the highest per capita income in the world) it is

entirely possible that one may witness similar upheavals. The possibility of such an upheaval has not been lost on the Iranian ruling clergy which has periodically called for the overthrow of the present Saudi regime.

Furthermore, apart from the possibilities of domestic conflict and upheaval, there also remains the constant likelihood of inter-state conflict. These possibilities exist largely because of unresolved territorial disputes in the region which may yet culminate in war. It appears that, while the Soviet Union does have both the motivation and the potential for mischief-making in the region, so far their activities have been limited--partly because of the inhospitable reception that it has received from most of the regimes and partly because it does not possess the necessary instruments for influence. For example, the oil-rich states have almost uniformly shown a predilection for Western manufactured goods and Western capital equipment over those provided by the Soviets. Apart from the constraints inherent in the region, Soviet activity in the region has also been hobbled owing to the knowledge that this area is of vital concern to the United States and the other OECD nations and that blatant interference in the region would bring about commensurate U.S. responses. This resolve to protect the interests of the United States and those of its allies is evident from the force deployments that the U.S. disposes over in the region, a fact that can hardly be lost on the Soviets. 25

For the foreseeable future, therefore, the Soviets are most likely to continue to pursue policies aimed at supporting regional states in their conflicts with the West in the hope of establishing what they often refer to as "mutually beneficial relations" that can evolve into long-term stable relationships. In addition, they are likely to continue to take advantage of instabilities within the region that promise, in their view, to weaken or

displace pro-Western political elites. All of this is part of what a group of French analysts of Soviet Third World policy have referred to as an oblique strategy" aimed at defeating the USSR's major opponents through an indirect strategy of the gradual undermining of its interests in the Third World. 26

It is important to keep in mind, however, that even though the Soviets have not proven particularly successful over the course of the past thirty years in turning political, economic and military support for countries of the region into an effective Soviet presence or into the Soviet ability to dictate developments in the region, the Soviet leadership has continued to expend resources for this purpose. Although direct Soviet extension of military power beyond the borders of Afghanistan is not likely, the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan--in particular, should the Soviets be successful in completing the pacification of the countryside--would provide the Soviets with the opportunity during a future crisis to bring military pressure to bear against either Pakistan or Iran. It is by no means unthinkable that in a post-Khomeini Iran the Soviets might provide clandestine support for elements of the Iranian population that opposed the continued domination of the fundamentalist clergy or the domination of minority regions by the government in Teheran.

The Gulf region, as we have noted above, is of vital importance for the economic well-being of Western Europe and East Asia. So long as the USSR remains committed to an overall policy of attempting to undermine Western interests in this area--as well as in other areas of the world--the United States and its allies must be prepared to respond effectively. As we have argued, the Soviets are far more likely to pursue policies aimed at supporting domestic instability in pro-Western states and supporting states in the region in conflicts with the West, than to engage in direct military involvement in the

region. However, their military presence in Afghanistan could not only provide a bridge-head from which to support unrest elsewhere, but can also act as a form of intimidation used to influence the decisions of political elites throughout the area.

NOTES

¹For a discussion of the petroleum resource endowments in the region see Shamram Chubin, ed , Security in the Persian Gulf Domestic Political Factors London International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1981

²The most comprehensive and balanced account of Soviet policy in Afghanistan can be found in Henry S Bradsher's Afghanistan and the Soviet Union Durham, NC Duke Press Policy Studies, 1983

³The Gulf states in which we are most interested in the remainder of this analysis are Saudi Arabia, North and South Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq and Iran

⁴It may be pertinent to point out that we are speaking of U S interests in the Gulf even though we are also interested in ascertaining the significance of the Gulf's economic potential Western Europe and for Japan because of all the OECD nations only the United States has the necessary military capability to prevent a possible Soviet interdiction of the oil supplies from the Gulf

⁵W Scott Thompson, (1982, p 159) "The Persian Gulf and the Correlation of Forces," International Security, vol 7, no 1

⁶McLaurin in Mohammed Mughisuddin, ed , Conflict and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf New York Praeger, 1977, pp

⁷Quoted in Alvin Z Rubinstein, ed , The Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union
New York Random House, 1972, p 152

⁸For a good discussion of the politics surrounding this issue see Adam Ulam,
Expansion and Coexistence New York Praeger, 1976

⁹The best analysis of the U S role in the overthrow of the Mossadegh regime can
be found in Barry Rubin, Paved with Good Intentions New York Oxford
University Press, 1980

¹⁰See Arah Y Yodfat, The Soviet Union and the Arabian Peninsula London
Croom Helm, 1983, p 17

¹¹See Roger E Kanet, "Soviet Military Assistance to the Third World," in John
F Copper and Daniel S Papp, eds , Communist Nations Military Assistance
Boulder, CO Westview Press, 1983, pp 39-71

¹²For details of this agreement see U S Department of State, Communist
Activities in Non-Communist Less Developed Countries, 1980, p 9

¹³Robert O Freedman and Robert H Donaldson, ed , The Soviet Union in the Third
World Boulder, CO Westview Press, 1981

¹⁴Yodfat, The Soviet Union, p 3

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶U S Department of Defense, Soviet Military Power Washington USGPO, 1984, p 125

¹⁷Zalmay, Khalilzad, "Soviet Policies in West Asia and the Persian Gulf," in Roger E Kanet, ed , Soviet Foreign Policy in the 1980s New York Praeger, 1982, p 322

¹⁸Pavel Demchenko, "Retribution Being Readied," Pravda, March 23, 1983, p 5

¹⁹Iurii Glukhov, "Protracted War," Pravda, November 14, 1983, p 5

²⁰Izvestiia, October 24, 1983, p 5

²¹For an elaboration of this point see Yodfat, The Soviet Union, pp 134-137

²²Lenore G Martin, The Unstable Gulf Lexington, MA D C Heath, 1984, p 26

²³On this point see Yodfat, The Soviet Union, pp 144-145, also see Martin, The Unstable Gulf, pp 114-115

²⁴Vladimir Peresada, "On a Dangerous Course," Pravda, February 13, 1981, p 5

²⁵For a good enumeration and discussion of U S deployments in and around the