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12/18

"POLITICO-MILITARY EVOLUTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN"

by Jon Kimche
Editor "Afro-Asian Affairs"

Conference:

THE MEDITERRANEAN CRISIS: EVOLUTION IN THE BALANCE OF POWER AND
PROBLEMS OF MANAGEMENT

Rome, 24-26 April 1975

Most major political decisions are dictated by events or by political need, not by Master Plans. This was true of the launching of the Ramadan War in October 1973 and of the fate of the Kissinger mission to the Middle East in March 1975. It is also currently affecting the shape of the Algerian plan for reshaping world trade in energy and commodities.

I want therefore to discuss here some of the principal specifics of the present situation in the Mediterranean and to do this against the background of the outcome of the Kissinger mission to Egypt and Israel which came to an end on March 22. For the ending of this mission, rather than the mission as such, has become a catalyst of major significance for the Mediterranean region.

It has, in the first instance, focussed attention on the role of the super-powers and, especially, on their preoccupation with their mutual relationship. It is this, more than anything else, which now conditions the political and strategic assessments of the two superpowers in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. It has largely resolved the previous uncertainty whether they faced each other in confrontation or collaboration.

It was Brezhnev's initiative at Vladivostock last October, which put the emphasis on collaboration rather than on rivalry or confrontation in the Middle East. It came as something of a surprise to President Ford and Secretary Kissinger when the Soviet leader proposed a two-tier approach towards a Middle East settlement on lines which the Americans favoured.

The Soviet Union would support, though not overtly, the Kissinger step-by-step method as an essential element in preparing the ground for the ultimate Geneva conference. Both the United States and the Soviet Union - and also the Israelis - assumed that with such patronage, and given Sadat's positive inclination, the Kissinger preparatory mission could not fail.

Kissinger did not succeed; but he did not fail. On the contrary, his two missions in February and March helped to clear the air, and to create a number of more favourable conditions for an ultimate settlement, probably partial, which had not existed before. It established clearly that there were

essential concessions which - in the conditions prevailing during March - neither Egypt nor Israel could make. Both the Rabin and the Sadat Governments were too weak in relation of their political support to make the concession which Kissinger required.

The first reaction by both superpowers was to misread the resulting situation and to opt, almost in a state of desperation, for a make-or-break session of the Geneva conference.

Then came the reassessments. The Russians were first off the mark. They had in the first flush of the aftermath assumed that President Sadat would drop like a ripe fruit back into the Soviet lap, a gift they could not resist even in the name of detente and collaboration. But it did not happen.

Moscow noted instead that the firmness shown by Sadat had boosted his position at home and in the Arab world, and that the same trend was reflected even more strongly in Israel. Rabin, after being a Prime Minister with a divided Cabinet and a dubious one-vote majority in parliament, had become head of a united nation, popular and strong inside the government and outside. Neither Sadat nor Rabin looked like a ripe apple.

At this point, there appears to have been high-level consultation between Washington and Moscow and the initiative had come from Washington. We know no details, only the outcome.

The Soviet ambassador to Egypt who was in Moscow, was despatched hastily to Cairo. At the same time, through a number of highly-placed intermediaries, the Soviet Government made direct contact with the Israeli leaders. What was significant in these Soviet moves was they were not conducted as counterpoints to the Kissinger mission but more as parallel moves to reinforce the Kissinger stand by clarifying the Soviet position in relation to the Geneva conference and the guaranteeing of the security of Egypt and Israel.

At this stage it is necessary to interpolate a broader Soviet assessment which considers the Mediterranean area as a whole and not only the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is one of the interesting by-products of these Soviet discussions in the wake of the Kissinger mission that it is possible to reconstruct the Soviet view on the current Mediterranean situation.

It is as much this evaluation of the Mediterranean situation as the all-important desire to maintain a high degree

of collaboration (more than detente) with the United States that is shaping current Soviet attitudes in the Mediterranean area and the Middle East.

It has to be noted here that there is an almost incredible gap or contradiction between the private face of Soviet attitudes as expressed in these confidential exchanges and the public face of Soviet press and radio presentation, and even of Soviet ministerial declarations.

The private face of Soviet policy is one of growing concern at the erosion of specifically Soviet position in the region. None of this was evident in the hard-line speech of Premier Kosygin with which he welcomed Sadam Husain in Moscow on April 14. In sum the Soviet position is put like this:

- The Soviet Government had made great efforts to court the Turkish Government and this had led Moscow to make a terrible mistake over the Cyprus issue. The Soviet Union has now withdrawn its support for Turkey and relations have never been worse between the two Governments.
- The Soviet Union had placed much hope on its relations with the Shah and even more on those with Iraq. Moscow has no illusions now that the Iranian-Iraqi Agreement signed in Algeria is in effect hostile to the Soviet position in both countries and especially to a Soviet presence in the Gulf.
- The recent conflict between Syria and Iraq over the Euphrates Dam control, which the Russians have constructed in Syria, has greatly embarrassed the Soviet Union.
- The Soviet leaders are also increasingly worried by the Byzantine politics of the Palestinian organizations, as they put it. They want to take the disruptive sting out of the Palestinian solution and have been active behind the scenes in seeking a rapprochement between Arafat and Husain.
- With so many uncertain factors and disunited elements on the Arab side, the Soviet view is that an early meeting of the Geneva conference would be disastrous: it would allow those Israelis who want to go to Geneva in order to expose its ineffectiveness to make their point.
- It would therefore be necessary to wait until these differences have been resolved, and the Preparatory work completed, before recalling the Geneva conference. Belayev has said the same thing publicly in his broadcasts to the United States.

Thus within three weeks of Kissinger's abrupt departure from the

- Middle East, the Soviet Union, Israel and Egypt were suggesting ways and means to reengage him in another negotiating process.
- The only area where the Russians felt reasonably happy was in their strategic position in the Mediterranean. The policy of strategic parity, they claim, has enabled them to establish a sound bargaining position with regard to the US Sixth Fleet. They want to improve this further in order to make possible the mutual withdrawal of the US and Soviet fleets from the Mediterranean.
 - They believe that in the changing popular mood of the United States this could become a possibility.

The United States position in the process of reassessment can be considered only marginally. The least mentioned aspect of it, at this stage, is the future of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. The Russians clearly consider this not as a short-range objective but one that could become of major significance at any time before the next Presidential election. Especially, if there are important political changes in Greece and Spain and possibly also in Italy.

A central element of the American reassessment process is the public discussion of the special relationship towards Israel. This is being conducted with a degree of frankness and realism unprecedented in American-Israel relations. But it also is evidently discussed with a great sense of responsibility by both parties.

The outcome of this facing up to the realities can be only beneficial for the United States and for the Israelis, but it could easily lead to a further misreading of the situation in the Middle East. For it has to be noted that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States has made any political gains in the Mediterranean and Middle East since the second world war as a result of direct military intervention.

The changes in the positions of influence and strength of the superpowers have come as a result of local military conflicts in Algeria, in the Arab-Israeli and the Turkish-Greek conflicts, and as consequence of domestic revolutionary changes in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Greece and this would seem to be the pattern also for the future.

Yet despite the seeming uncertainties of the American reassessment process, the diplomatic initiative in the area remains with the United States and especially with Dr. Kissinger's own brand of diplomacy. This is characterized by its considerable measure of understanding and even collaboration with the Soviet Union with regard to the agreed priorities of current superpower diplomacy.

As Dr. Kissinger explained after the Vladivostock summit last October, one of the areas where this has become possible is in the Middle East. For it was here that the Soviet Union and the United States faced the most immediate need for an agreed form of crisis management.

Superpower policies in relation to their client states in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean has been composed hitherto of a mixture of intervention and non-intervention according to the needs of the client states. Before the 1967 war the United States intervened with massive help and arms for Israel; the Soviet Union did the same for Egypt. When war broke out both superpowers desisted from intervention: the United States because Israel was doing well and the Russians because they did not wish to clash with the United States.

There were some variations in 1973 with the roles reversed at the outset but basically the unwillingness or inability of the superpowers to intervene was still evident. The same was true of the Cyprus crisis in 1974.

At Vladivostock - and since - the superpowers faced their major preoccupation in the area: how can they prevent any of their client states (without using this term in any pejorative sense) from making an independent decision to go to war or reject terms of settlement acceptable to the superpowers.

This problem for both superpowers alike has gained an added urgency in recent weeks as a result of the Pact of Algiers between Iran and Iraq. This has introduced a new power-factor into the Gulf region with the tremendous military potential which from the outset was accompanied by a warning to the superpowers not to intervene in this region.

This unexpected Pact has created new areas of uncertainty and disquiet in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Syria not to speak of the lesser Gulf states. Since it is also the region with the greatest oil reserves in the world, it has added greatly to the

sense of urgency in the superpower need for reassessing more than anything their own ability to control the situation which developed during March and April 1975 in the wake of the Kissinger mission though not necessarily connected with it.

The central feature of this development was that quite suddenly the principal elements in the Middle East were in the hands of strong governments whose strength consisted to some considerable extent on their emphasis of their own independence from superpower pressures and intervention.

The Shah's recent policies in India, Afghanistan and especially his agreement with Iraq were all part of this resistance to Soviet policies in these areas; both Iran and Iraq had been urged by the Soviet Union two years ago to allow the Soviet Union to mediate a settlement between them. The Shah was not ready for it; his doubts about the Americans had not then developed as they have done since; and the Iraqi administration was too insecure to risk such a turn-about in policy.

This has changed. Iranian influence and connexions have been reinforced in West Asia, in the Gulf and in the Arab world. In Iraq, the de facto ruler, Saddam Husain al Tikriti, completed the deal with the Shah without Moscow's knowledge and added the warning against foreign intervention in the Gulf only months after Iraq had signed the Protocol attached to the Treaty of Friendship which permitted the Soviet Union to develop naval facilities near UmmQasr in the Gulf.

The role of the Kissinger mission as a catalyst, transforming a weak administration into a popular and strong government, was most evident in Israel. Had Rabin accepted the Kissinger terms on March 22 and agreed to withdraw from the Sinai passes and the Abu Rodeis oilfield without any political engagement by Egypt, he might have won the support of the Knesset with the smallest of a majority, possibly only a single vote.

The rejection of the American-sponsored proposal and his accompanying firmness rallied the country, the Cabinet and parliament. Rabin could express his wish that Kissinger resume his mission, or go to Geneva on this new basis of strength.

There was another important but not very evident development in the internal situation in Israel. The country has been in the unique position since the October War to have enjoyed the benefits of defeat without having had to suffer or pay the price of defeat.

In military terms, and also in the economic and other fields, the country has gone through a period of reassessment and reevaluation.

The full impact of this may yet take time to show itself. But in two fields the consequences are becoming apparent.

Most immediately significant is the strategic reassessment of border security in relation to peace. Dayan, for example, said after the 1967 war that if he had to choose between Sharm as-Sheikh and peace, he would choose Sharm. More recently, however, Dayan has been discussing the sensitive problem of the Golan Heights and stressed that so long as Israel remains in occupation there could be no peace.

It is this realization in the wake of the October War that has led to an unprecedented scientific and production effort by Israel's war industries, especially aircraft and electronic, and in a total revision of previously accepted maxims of national strategy. The debate in some areas is still proceeding but conclusions are emerging and affecting the strategic pattern, in Sinai especially.

The basic assumption at the root of this strategy is that the superpowers have not yet mastered the problem of crisis management in the Middle East and that future strategy has to be based on a combination of non-dependance on superpower support and rigid economy in the use of force and supplies - in every way the opposite to the conditions prevailing during the October War of 1973.

The second area of reconsideration of attitudes as well as policies concern the Palestine problem. There is of course no single representative Palestinian position and there is no great constancy of policy. Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria have their protegé Palestinian movements, and so have, to a lesser extent, the Egyptians. This has become further complicated by the de facto adoption of the Arafat wing of the PLO by the Soviet Union.

The Palestinians are thus again in danger of becoming pawns in the power politics of third parties. Over the years, and even in the days of the British Mandate, they were often a convenient excuse for others to obstruct a settlement for imperial or national reasons which were of no concern or interest to the Palestinians. The most recent example of this is the way the Soviet Union orga-

nized the UN support necessary for the recognition of the PLO and for the address to the Assembly by Yasir Arafat.

In the same way, the Soviet Union is now mediating between Arafat and King Husain of Jordan. In a way, one could describe this as a Soviet approach to crisis management since the Russians are greatly worried by the instability and unpredictability of PLO policies which could provoke Israel into another military operation in which the Lebanon could be the principal victim.

The Israeli attitude towards the Palestinians has if anything hardened during the process of reassessment. In a way, the Israelis are probably better informed about the internal developments inside the PLO and other Palestinian groups than any western or Arab government. Because of this, they have a massive dossier of Palestinian intentions and policies towards Israel which are not the same as those presented to the western world.

These views may be no more representative of Palestinian intentions than any other views expressed but they do not encourage the Israelis to drop their guard. The Israelis agree on this point with the Soviet Union when they urge the Palestinians to produce the credible and representative voice willing and capable to negotiate.

The Russians believe that Arafat is such a man and are prepared to back him. In order to make him acceptable to Israel, the Russians are now urging the PLO to accept the Husain Federation plan, if only as a first step towards a Jordanian-Palestinian state which would in due course shed its Jordanian prefix.

The Palestinian crunch will come when the Geneva issue is again opened and relevant - this may take some time yet. But the Russians have been making preliminary soundings with regard to this, and have exchanged ideas about it not only with the United States and the Arab countries but also with Israel.

The Russians want a precise definition of what Palestinian demands mean. For the first time this month, the Russians have spelled out what they understand by the customary formula. But what is the Palestinian definition? Is it that advanced by Hassanein Haikal - a secular state in Palestine and contiguous frontiers between Egypt and Jordan in the Negev? Or is it that favoured by Sadat and the Russians at one time - a return to the 1947 frontiers proposed by the UN partition committee?

Before the Israelis negotiate the Palestinian question, they would want to know precisely what are the Palestinian demands now and how representative are the Palestinians who will negotiate the settlement, or what will happen if they are disowned by the "Rejection Front".

All this has produced an important change in the Palestinian aspect of the Middle Eastern settlement. It has been said often during the processes of negotiation that no solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is possible without the solution of the problem of the Palestinians. This is no longer true. Just as the so-called Jewish problem has not been settled by the establishment of Israel, so it is unlikely that the solution of the Palestine problem will settle the Middle Eastern conflicts. It may help - that is all.

The Palestine problem has to be settled for its own sake, and not for the sake of Arab or superpower strategic reasons; and that can be done only by a settlement arrived at by the two parties, the Israelis and the Palestinians, principally concerned, that is, if the problem is soluble in our time.

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