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The Persian Gulf
Soviet opportunities, American options, Arab perceptions, European attitudes

by

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What I have prepared for this session is not the "classical" paper, but only a short series of introductory remarks.

I hope they will serve, together with those presented by Adeed Dawisha, as a basis for a fruitful discussion.

Soviet Opportunities

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the almost forgotten but still ongoing war between Iraq and Iran, have without a doubt drastically changed the strategic situation in South-West Asia.

It might be interesting to debate whether and to what extent security considerations influenced the Soviet decision to use their own military forces outside the Warsaw Pact area for the first time since the end of World War II; but such a discussion would amount to little more than a theoretical disquisition on the subtleties of the Kremlin's decision-making process.

It might be more important to assess whether or not the invasion of Afghanistan marks a turning point in Soviet policy with regards to those Third World countries which, though run by Communist regimes, tend to diverge in their foreign policy from the pattern of full adherence to the Soviet line.

It is true that, in the case of Afghanistan, the geographical contiguity of the country has greatly facilitated Soviet military intervention. The Soviets are, however, pursuing a policy of "internal occupation" of other, more distant, "friendly" Third World marxist regimes, through the control (either direct or indirect, via East German and Cuban proxies) of their most important power centers, including the

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armes forces and the security forces. This might give Moscow the possibility of toppling the old, not sufficiently aligned regimes, bringing to power men of tested loyalty.

In this context, it might be interesting to assess the advantages and the disadvantages of such a policy if the Soviets really intended to pursue it.

But even this assessment would be a theoretical exercise and would not change the stark reality of Soviet military forces at about 700 Km. from the Gulf of Oman.

It is not easy to predict if the invasion of Afghanistan -- which, apart from any more or less legitimate security motives, was also aimed at filling the power vacuum left by Britain in the Indian Ocean and at creating bases of political controLand military strength, in view of its eventual dependence on Gulf Oil -- will be followed by another Soviet expansionist drive to the South.

It is, however, evident that the Afghanistan invasion, the chaotic domestic situation in Iran and the generally gloomy picture in the Middle East, improve the Soviet's strategic position in the area and create new opportunities for Soviet political and military action.

The options open to the Soviets can be schematically sketched as follows:

Option one: support (including indirect military support if necessary) of an autonomous movement in Baluchistan, leading to the creation of a pro-Soviet political entity independent of Pakistan and Iran which would agree to letting Moscow develop and later utilize the presently inadequate naval facilities on the Arabic Sea.

Option two: supporting the constitution in Iran of a government including the pro-Soviet Tudeh party.

This might occur, particularly in the present situation, if the

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Ayatollahs, confronted with a counter-revolutionary lay movement, were forced to call on the support of the more united and better organized Communist party and were subsequently obliged to pay the political price for this support in terms of power-sharing.

Or it might occur if Communist participation in the government were perceived as necessary to obtain Soviet support in the politico-military struggle with Iraq, in order to check the Kurdish movement in the North, and to put an end to the country's international isolation, choosing the lesser of the two "big evils".

The Soviet Union could aim, alternatively, at a 'finlandization" (I use this word even though I do not like it) of Iran, large enough to influence, if not dictate, Teheran's foreign policy.

Option three: reforging of closer links with Iraq, either through the classical instrument of arms supplies, offering to provide new, more technologically advanced weapons systems, or by supporting Iraqi territorial claims over the Shatt al Arab and the Arabistan region, or covertly helping Baghdad to achieve its latest declared objective, namely the disintegration of Iran. This would paradoxically lead back to the opportunities offered by the previous option, namely increased influence in Iran. Indeed, it is rather significant that the Soviet Union should have the option of gambling on two sides (Iraq and Iran) to obtain the same result in strategic terms: a kind of exclusive patronage of the two countries in the region and greater influence and control over their policies.

Option four: military intervention in Iran (possibly at the request of the Tudeh party) to establish a regime strictly loyal to Moscow, and to gain direct control over the country's oil resources and extend its military threat to the whole Gulf area.

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Option five: attempting to destabilize the Gulf area from within, by exploiting the social contradictions in the sheikdoms and in Saudi Arabia, the slow emerging of new "classes" with more expectations in terms of power sharing, the disrupting force of the islamic revolution, the Arab-Israeli struggle and the unresolved PLO issue; or attempting to destablize the Gulf area from outside, using the particular strategic position offered by South Yemen and the forces of the Cuban "legion".

Option six: attempting the destabilization of Sudan "from the West", via the expansionist foreign policy of Libya, with the aim of extending Soviet influence from Ethiopia to the whole upper Nile region and to central Africa.

Option seven: occupation of the Saudi Arabian oil fields by means of an airborne troop operation.

Option eight: interrupting the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, thus cutting off the oil flow to the Western world.

These options are all theoretically possible and technically (i.e. in terms of military capacity) feasible.

However, some of them are not very credible, for political and military reasons, unless the Soviet Union decides to abandon its long-standing caution toward international situations presenting a high danger of a superpower clash, and intends to test the American resolve up to the point of risking a direct military confrontation.

The options four, seven and eight would represent a direct threat to vital American interests. It seems unlikely, even though not impossible, that the Soviet Union, knowing the values at stake, would pursue such an openly threatening policy.

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The oil factor will certainly influence Soviet behaviour. The Soviet Union will not only be very sensitive to its own eventual dependence on Persian Gulf oil, but will also be worried about maintaining the necessary flow of oil to the Warsaw Pact countries; a flow which presents an important element of the Pact's cohesion and the political and economic viability of the Eastern European countries. It is significant that during the Iraq-Iran war the Soviet Union reportedly put its full pressure on Syria to let Iraq resume pumping of oil to the Banias terminal, in order to maintain Iraqi oil supplies to Eastern Europe.

However, in the short term, it appears that the main opportunities open to the Soviet Union are the traditional strategies already tested in other parts of the world -- albeit with varying results -- over the past thirty years. These include:

- attempted destabilization by helping to create the socio-political conditions leading to internal power changes advantageous to its own foreign policy;
- the use of its own soldiers and proxies (Cubans, East-Europeans, North Koreans) to train and support the forces of the various marxist "national liberation" movements;
- the use of arms supply agreements as a means of creating dependence and acquiring influence;
- willingness to step quickly into any power vacuums that may arise, taking risks if necessary, except (at least so far) the risk of direct confrontation with the United States.

Today these proven methods seem to represent a more real and tangible threat for several reasons. First, they are linked to an active and expansionist international policy, and are implemented more indiscriminately now than in the past. Second, they are backed by a military force which has acquired considerable capacity in projecting force abroad. Third, the areas of the world in which they could be applied are

vital to the economic interests of the West. And fourth, there is a high degree of instability in these areas, partly due to the existence of particular social and economic conditions in the countries, and partly connected with international and inter-state disputes.

It is precisely these latent internal and external tensions which offer the greatest opportunities for Soviet policy, and at the same time pose the greatest problems for Western intervention, for the conflict contains a mixture of elements drawn from the East-West, North-South and East-South confrontation. It cuts across the traditional definitions and alignments of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, obscuring their significance and the boundaries between them. It introduces into political problems the religious factor which limits and at times inhibits any rational solution. It increases feelings of insecurity and threat, causing the countries to give priority to defense questions, and increasing the importance of the military factor. In view of the obvious social and economic contradictions, it gives ample scope and credibility to the movements which -- often with opposing aims and different motives -- seek to subvert the current political systems; and it naturally offers equal scope for outside interference and intervention.

United States Options

The United States' attitude and policy toward the situation in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf appears to be based on several assumptions, considered valid throughout the '80s.

1. The Western World (Europe and Japan in particular) will continue to vitally depend on Gulf oil.
2. The region will continue to be very instable and its instability will persist even after the eventual fading-out of the Arab-Israeli confrontation.

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3. Progress in the resolution of the PLO issue will be very difficult and slow.
4. The West has little hope of preventing the Soviet Union from exploiting the latent instabilities in the region. It can only hope to limit the damages of Soviet action.
5. The Soviet Union will continue to modernize and to upgrade the projection capability of its forces, and its capacity to intervene either directly or indirectly.
6. It is very improbable that the Soviet Union will agree on a special "code of conduct" in South West Asia.
7. Arms control negotiations will not solve the problems of the region. In Richard Burt's words: "present arms control proposals for the Indian Ocean area offer little prospect for enhancing security".
8. The pro-West and friendly countries in the region will not be able to solve the problems themselves.
9. It will be essential for the United States to build up its capability to fight a limited war in the region.
10. It will be essential to demonstrate to the countries of the region that the United States is and will continue to be a reliable partner. Again, in Richard Burt's words, "to demonstrate that it pays to be America's friends".
11. The time element is paramount and should not be wasted. A rational and viable Western strategy should be implemented without delay.

Basically, the United States, in its analysis of the situation in the Middle East and the Gulf, tends to stress and to give priority to the Soviet "threat", giving the impression of being less concerend by the "regional" elements of instability. And the analysis of the

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available options seem to follow the same basic line of thinking. These options can be broadly indicated as follows:

1. rely on the military forces of the countries of the region.
2. adopt a strategy of "horizontal escalation"
3. adopt a strategy of "vertical escalation"
4. acquire the capability to project American military forces into the region.

The first option is actively pursued. The Reagan Administration has presented an extensive security assistance program of 6,900 million dollars for fiscal year 1982, which represents a budget increase of 57% as compared to fiscal year 1981 levels. Under the new program a number of countries in the Persian Gulf and Middle East would get huge increases in security assistance. For example, Kenya would receive 51 million dollars in foreign military sales (FMS) (6 million in fiscal year 1981); Sudan would receive 100 million dollars in FMS (30 million in fiscal year 1981); Oman's FMS increase would be from 25 to 40 million dollars; Egypt's FMS program would climb from 550 million to 900 million dollars in the new fiscal year; Israel would receive 1400 million dollars as in fiscal year 1981. In June of this year, a five-year, 3-billion-dollar American economic and military aid package to Pakistan was finalized after a visit to Islamabad by a State Department team. Furthermore, the United States agreed to the immediate sale of an unspecified number of F-16 aircraft and some conventional military equipment.

The security assistance program is complemented by a large arms sales program. Armaments, some very sophisticated, are being provided to Egypt (F-16 aircraft, M-60A3 battle tanks, M-113 armored troop carriers), Oman, Saudi Arabia (F-15 aircraft and related equipment), Jordan ("Cobra" gunship helicopters and M-60A3 tanks), Qatar, the UAE ("Hawk" surface-to-air missiles), and Somalia (long-range air-defense radar systems

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and anti-aircraft guns). These weapons supplies play an important role in the United States' overall strategy for the area.

Relying only on the military forces in the region is not considered, however, a fully viable option: regional military forces alone, even if strenghtened and improved in their combat capabilities would not be capable of effectively deterring Soviet action and could not cope with an actual Soviet threat.

The second option, "horizontal escalation", would entail countering a Soviet move in the Gulf with a kind of a "trip-wire" strategy by which the United States would respond to Moscow by threatening and putting pressure on Soviet interests elsewhere. But this strategy is considered of difficult practical application. It would in fact be difficult to determine which Soviet interests to threaten and by what credible means, in order to create a valid and strong deterrent effect.

The third option, "vertical escalation", involves deterring the Soviets by threatening to escalate, in a crisis, from conventional to nuclear armaments. But in the present situation of nuclear strategic parity between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Americans see this strategy as lacking in the necessary credibility.

The United States considers the last option as the only one effectively applicable to the strategic situation of the area, and has adopted it, pushing full-board toward the establishment of a Rapid Deployment Force capable of providing, together with the peace-time forces presently in the Indian Ocean, a quick response in many regional contingencies.

The Reagan Administration recognizes that this is going to involve a long and costly effort (over 2 billion dollars in fiscal year 1982), and that many complex and difficult problems will have to be overcome.

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In November 1980, a military exercise, code-named "Bright Star", took place in Egypt with the participation of Egyptian units and of some 1400 American troops airlifted from the United States. The exercise showed very clearly the severe logistical and technical problems the United States is presently facing in moving its military forces to distant areas. Just to give a simple example: even though the force employed was only a reinforced battalion, the airlift operation lasted six days and involved a quarter of the entire C-141 fleet of the U.S. Military Airlift Command.

The most difficult problem, however, concerns the actual availability of deployment bases in case of need. The United States has signed agreements with Oman, Somalia and Kenya for the utilization of some of their naval and air facilities. A program has been established and is presently underway to modernize and upgrade those facilities to US standards at an estimated cost of 1 billion dollars. Furthermore, president Sadat has repeatedly stated his willingness to support the American forces by making available the airbases on Egyptian territory.

These agreements, however, do not permit the Americans to establish their own military bases, and even the utilization of the local facilities is not without limitations. This might, in a crisis, seriously jeopardize American military contingency planning.

There is no sign that any country in the region will openly accept a direct and permanent US military presence. Any deployment of American military personnel is considered as "temporary" (250 were in Oman to conduct a communications exercise and to set up a communications center, 400 are in Saudi Arabia in connection with the AWACS operations). But how "temporary" is temporary? Is it possible to imagine the construction of living quarters and the setting up of POL storages, weapons stores

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and equipment depots - as envisaged in the program for upgrading local facilities - if US personnel is not allowed to be present to guard and service them? Would not the direct presence of US military forces, however small, risk radicalizing superpower confrontation in the Gulf, leading at the same time to greater domestic instability in many Arab countries? On the other hand, without a large amount of prestocking of military equipment, how could the RDF be developed into a rapid and efficient military tool?

The Arab Position

This dichotomy is magnified by the approach of the pro-Western Arab countries to the security issues of the region. For them the problem of the Soviet threat is real enough, but is subordinated to the threat posed by the Islamic integralist movement, the polarization of the inter-Arab conflict, the danger of greater regional instability, a sudden new flare-up of the Iran-Iraq war, and the problem of the continuing Arab-Israeli tension, partly linked to the failure to find a solution to the Palestinian question.

The Middle East tour of American Secretary of State Haig last April confirmed the unwillingness - for the time being - of Jordan and Saudi Arabia to join a formal anti-Soviet security pact, their overriding concern with maintaining the regional balance, and the importance they assign to the Palestinian question, even though both favor (as do other Arab countries) a relationship with the United States involving arms supplies, a build-up of their military capacity and more or less explicit guarantees of security.

The Cooperation Council recently formed by the six conservative Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman) could be interpreted as a tentative step toward a firmer assertion of an autonomous capacity to elaborate and manage a coordinated policy in the region.

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Due to the deep differences among the members in their appraoch to the three key areas of collaboration - oil, finance and defense - the Council is presently little more than an exercise in cooperation.

It is a sign, however, that something is moving in the Gulf and that the direction of movement points toward a basic position of non-alignment. The wording of the final communiqué of the Council meeting last May, with its statements on the security of the Gulf as the sole responsibility of the countries of the region, and on the firm rejection of any foreign intervention, appears a significant confirmation of that emerging, though not unanimous, position.

The European attitude

The European attitude is characterized by general agreement with the US on the need to protect the West's vital interests in the region, but there are also differences of opinion on the best political and military means of doing so.

It would not be correct, however, to speak of a "European" attitude as opposed to an "American" attitude. Putting it in very generic terms, I think it can be said that whereas the United States tends to place priority on the "Soviet threat", many European countries tend to be more concerned about the "regional" elements. In other words, the factors causing internal instability, the dangers of inter-Arab radicalization, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the effects of the failure to find a solution to the Palestinian problem bother the European governments more than the US Administration.

Europe's attitude is of course influenced by its energy dependence on Arab states. It is also conditioned by internal political factors, particularly in those countries where foreign policy options tend to have

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an abnormal effect on the domestic political situation; countries in which, for example, the presence of strong communist parties means that such options can be used to create widespread popular opposition. Or to take another example, when socialist parties are in power, these same choices give rise to contradictions and conflict within those parties, insofar as socialist ideological purity tends to be judged on the basis of such issues.

A fairly clear example of these problems and the difficulty of achieving a united Western position, was the abortive attempt, at the time of the Iraq-Iran war, to set up a multinational fleet for the purpose of keeping open the Strait of Hormuz.

These domestic factors would have an effect even if the United States and the European allies held identical views; which however is not the case today, at least as far as the Middle East and the Persian Gulf are concerned.

Having increased, and planning to further increase its military effort in the Indian Ocean and Gulf area, the United States has logically called on its European allies to contribute toward this effort.

This has re-opened the old dispute over "burden sharing" but the issue is much wider and more difficult this time than that of sharing the costs of maintaining American troops in Europe. The discussion centers now on Europe's contribution to the defense of areas, outside Nato boundaries, where interests are not exclusively American but mainly European. There is a conviction on the American side that Europe could do more, but is not willing to pay the political and economic price. The European countries, on the other hand, consider that they are already doing a great deal to defend the common interests and are in general prepared to make a greater effort, provided that the political and

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economic costs are not so high that they backfire on their domestic affairs or on their North-South relations; provided, too, that it does not exceed their own assessment of the Soviet threat and the limits of their own, often necessarily rigid, security policy.

There is a widespread feeling among Europeans that it would be illogical and politically harmful to let Europe's vital interests be defended exclusively by the United States. On the other hand, even though each European country is presently pursuing a national, if not nationalistic policy in the area, there seems to be little agreement on how to confront the situation in South-East Asia with coordinated European political and military action.

It would be impossible to utilize the Nato frame to elaborate and wage a common allied strategy. To push for an enlargement of the Nato area of responsibility would mean to push for a breakdown of the Atlantic alliance.

The so-called "division of labor" between the United States and the European allies has evident political shortcomings; but the present strategy of national, scarcely coordinated initiatives is not offering any prospects of successfully countering possible Soviet moves.

The problem is difficult and complex, in particular in its military aspects, since it is precisely in the military field that the United States is pressing for a European contribution. An alternative course of action, though not a solution to the problem, might be to adopt what I would define as a "collaboration in labor". This would consist in adopting a step-by-step European approach involving a graduated scale of actions aimed at taking maximum advantage of the present conditions, but not excluding a priori other initiatives which it might be possible to implement at some later date. In practice, it would consist of a

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mixture of coordinated national, military initiatives taken outside the Nato area, and of coordinated, still national initiatives taken within the Nato framework.

Coordination is the key element in this approach. For those measures taken within the Nato framework there is already a viable structure and working procedures exist; the measures should be aimed at strengthening Europe's defense and at assuming a larger European military role, taking into consideration that anything that is done to improve Nato's defense capabilities, particularly on its Southern flank, has a positive effect on the strategic situation in the Middle East and in the Gulf area.

For those measures taken outside Nato it is paramount to establish a "contingency political coordination" to precede any eventual military contingency planning.

This contingency political coordination should involve deciding for each of the possible crises in the Middle East and the Gulf what latitude of support the European countries are prepared to give to American action, either individually or in concert. This support should consist of a number of political measures and military responses at various levels of involvement and intensity, ranging from simple technical and logistic support to direct partecipation of its own forces.

Such coordination should prevent any repetition of the split between Europe and the United States which occurred at the time of 1973 Arab-Israeli war and should afford US contingency planning a greater degree of flexibility and certainty.

Another field where a coordinated effort should be established is that of the economic and political contribution to regional stability.

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The European countries can do a great deal in terms of political and economic cooperation with the Arab states, because they are not handicapped by the limitations imposed on the United States by its role and status as a super-power. The special relationship which has been or could be established between Europe and the Arab countries can play an important role in countering Soviet penetration into the region. However, to be fully effective, this role should encompass the capability to provide, if necessary, a credible security cover. But this can only be achieved through coordinated Western efforts.

Conclusions

The strategic situation in South-West Asia has altered, and this is evident to all. It is however just as evident that, though there is substantial agreement on many important points, the United States' and Europe's overall assessments of these objective changes differ.

Both the United States and Europe are aware of the problems posed by the new situation; there is consensus that the Soviet threat has increased; but there is also a certain disagreement over how to define the threat and the most suitable means for dealing with it.

The European countries tend to give political and economic measures priority over the prospective use of military force, partly because it is politically difficult and economically costly to take the military initiatives necessary to fully meet the requests for greater military effort put forward by the United States.

Furthermore the attitude of the European countries is conditioned by their particular economic situations, their dependence on imported oil and their awareness of being more vulnerable to any crisis in the Gulf.

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In effect, the use of political and economic instruments appears more useful in consideration of the fact that the region's security is threatened more by the risk of internal political instability than by that of direct Soviet intervention.

On the other hand, it is necessary, even in the case of the least likely Soviet options in the Gulf, to take the appropriate political and military steps to reduce their technical feasibility and provide an effective deterrent in terms of a strong and certain Western reaction.

In this context, it would be politically wrong to let the United States act alone in the region. Such an abdication of responsibility by Europe could have detrimental effects both on Euro-American relations and on the actual development of events in the region, where the European countries can and should play an important role of political and military deterrence, mediation and stabilization.