

The great Mediterranean sellout is under way

by Criton Zoakos

The Soviet ambassador to Turkey, Vladimir Lavrov, held a press conference in Ankara on the morning of Jan. 24, hours after the U.S. naval task force launched a series of naval and air war games at the Gulf of Syrtis, off the Libyan coast.

"I can tell you," Ambassador Lavrov stressed to the press present, "that now the United States has started military maneuvers at the Libyan coast, and that the Soviet Union has made a demarche. We have called on the United States not to seek results which would escalate the matter to serious proportions." This was the second time in three weeks that the Soviet Union has warned Washington not to involve itself militarily in Libya.

The first time was on Jan. 7, when "TASS was authorized to state," that the Soviet government will ensure, "by all necessary means," that no American military action against Libya would succeed. At the time, the Soviet government made the significant assertion that it will not tolerate any alteration in *Mediterranean* military relations "because the Soviet Union is a *Black Sea* power." Most people failed to either comprehend, or appreciate this extraordinary logic.

The Soviet statement, however, was meant to draw attention to the fact that only two days earlier, the first-ever full-fledged Soviet aircraft carrier, the *Kremlin*, had sailed from the Black Sea, through the Turkish Straits, and into the Mediterranean. Though not fully operational and still about to enter sea trials, the *Kremlin's* passage through the Turkish Straits was a masterful abrogation, *sotto voce*, of the 1936 Monteux Convention which prohibits the passage of this type of warship from the Straits.

'Cyprus is not far. . .'

During his Jan. 24 press conference, Ambassador Lavrov presented to the Ankara press his country's just released proposal for a solution of the 12-year-old crisis of the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. Lavrov's argument was, once again, based on this new Russian theory of "spheres of influence," namely that the strategic realities of geographical proximity, the fact that "Cyprus is not far from the southern Soviet Union and in a region about which the Soviet Union cares," oblige the Soviet Union to put forward its demands.

The Soviet Union's Cyprus proposal, made on Jan. 21, is militarily very significant. It calls for a) the elimination of the two major British air and naval bases there, b) the removal of some 17,000 Turkish troops, and c) the convening of a "representative international conference," made up of the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, the United States, Greece, Turkey, and "certain non-aligned states." By the latter, some suspect the Soviet Union might mean nearby Syria!

Purpose of this "international conference," according to Moscow, will be to produce a treaty providing for: "demilitarization of the island, including withdrawal of all foreign troops, removal of all foreign military bases and installations, a system of effective international guarantees for independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Cyprus, respect by all states of its non-aligned status."

Unless the United States categorically rejects this proposal, Turkey will, inevitably, find herself obliged to accom-

modate. In such a case, this year's diplomatic-military tug-of-war in the Mediterranean will revolve around Moscow's efforts to produce two sets of Mediterranean "international conferences," one over Cyprus and one over the Arab-Israeli conflict. Both of these conferences have as their objective to establish the Soviet Union as the dominant power and the arbiter center for the Mediterranean.

The State Department is all for it, and is stage managing its efforts in conjunction with Israel. The turning point which introduced the present spate of diplomatic and military maneuvers in favor of designating the Soviet Union as the leading imperial power in the Mediterranean basin was a quasi-secret message to the Arab governments, on Dec. 10, 1985, from Secretary of State George Shultz and special Middle East negotiator Richard Murphy, announcing that the United States favors a comprehensive, international conference on the Middle East, with the Soviet Union.

Subsequent to that message, most of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering was conducted by the pro-Sharon faction of the Israeli establishment, with the partisans of Prime Minister Shimon Peres and his Labour Party allies maintaining their own parallel version of a Soviet-Israeli accommodation.

For example, Israel's role in the Greece-Turkey-Cyprus matter: Former deputy chief of the Mossad, and present director-general of the Israeli foreign ministry, the Irgunist David Kimche, engaged in an intricate play with his friends in the Socialist Mr. Papandreou's government of Greece, which involved delivering the critical "Zionist lobby" vote in the U.S. Congress in favor of Greece's requests for U.S. military aid, and against Turkey's parallel and conflicting requests. Briefly: on Jan. 10, the State Department announced the commercial sale to Greece (i.e., without any treaty obligations), of a large shipment of American F-16 jets.

Three days after this announcement, David Kimche made a triumphant visit to Greece, proceeded to draw up a series of long-term projects with Greece's KGB- and Qaddafi-ridden so-called "National Security" establishment, and from there proceeded to a secret three-day visit to Finland, of all places.

Finland is the officially designated diplomatic liaison between Israel and the Soviet Union, for lack of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Very little is known about the Sharon-ally Kimche's whereabouts in Finland, and even less about the speculation that he might, secretly, have slipped into neighboring Soviet Union.

What for?

Sharon and his strategists, among whom Kimche is the most prominent and influential, have been in secret talks with the Soviets since at least August of 1981, for the purpose of defining and developing a new politico-military order of things in the Mediterranean, where Soviet interests would be dominant, and Israel would be the principal broker.

While Kimche was in Finland, and perhaps in Russia, a

deputy foreign minister of the Soviet Union arrived in London to hold far-ranging cooperation discussions with the Foreign Office there. At about the same time, the South Yemen crisis broke out, whereupon, Foreign Office and Soviet foreign ministry, decided, on the spot, to create a joint "crisis management team," to manage the Aden crisis. Not much is known of the team's doings, other than the fact that Britain is both according Russia the status of Middle Eastern arbiter, as well as housebreaking its diplomats into the mysteries of Yemenite and other tribal intrigues.

The crisis management committee was hardly in place when King Hussein of Jordan and Prime Minister Peres of Israel both arrived in London, to be joined by the State Department's "special Middle East negotiator" Richard Murphy. The King reiterated his insistence on meeting Israel only in an international conference with the Soviet Union present.

Peres reiterated his insistence that the Soviet Union first establish diplomatic relations with Israel and then join the international conference. Murphy repeated that the U.S. has "no objection" to such "international conference." Ironically, the Russians do not appear to be in as great a hurry for such an "international conference" as some others are.

It is said that Ariel Sharon and his friends in Israel very much want to preemptively force a military crisis, preferably a Mediterranean-wide one, in order to precipitate this "international conference" before Gorbachov and his Russians are fully prepared for it, in order to improve Israel's—i.e., Sharon's—bargaining position. It is also said that Sharon, together with George Shultz, would very much like to see a direct military clash between the United States and Libya, which will allow him the free hand to engage in a shooting war with Syria.

The overall military situation throughout the Mediterranean is deteriorating dramatically. The American naval and air maneuvers near Libya are probably timed to coincide with the imminently threatened activation of Soviet-built SAM-5 anti-aircraft batteries in Libya; while the U.S. naval buildup in the area has been going on, a similar Soviet buildup has proceeded which has brought the number of major Soviet combat ships in the area to over 35: The Italian armed forces in the two weeks since Jan. 10 have engaged in a massive buildup of their defense positions in the south, especially Sicily and the positions of Sigonella, Pantelleria, and the cruise-missile base of Comiso itself. Additionally, there is the Syria-ordered final military offensive in Lebanon, aimed at toppling President Gemayel and transforming Lebanon into a political appendage of Syria in short order.

It appears that the ongoing military buildup, and the intensification of conflict, are about to precipitate, some time in 1986, the convocation of a major "Mediterranean international conference," in which the Soviet Union is expected to assert its new imperial prerogatives in the Mediterranean region.

The question for Sharon-Kimche is how big a piece of the action they are going to get.