

The Persian Gulf: from military build-up to disengagement

by Thierry Lalevée

On Dec. 22, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Petrovsky proposed to the United Nations that the U.N. Military Planning Staff be convened to create a U.N. naval peace-keeping task force for the Persian Gulf. This has opened a new chapter in, not Soviet, but American policy toward the Gulf. The result might well be a total withdrawal of the present U.S. task force sent last summer, and a major political and diplomatic victory for the Soviet Union in the region.

The Soviet proposal has been circulating for months. However, only now has Moscow called for the convening of a special session of the five permanent members of the Security Council to discuss it. At the same time, Soviet leaders have indicated that they would wholeheartedly support implementation of the July 1987 U.N. Security Council Resolution 598, for a cease-fire in the Persian Gulf war.

Why the timing? First, this is the result of several months of hard bargaining between the superpowers. Second, Moscow thinks that the time is ripe for a deal whereby, while consolidating the ties it has built with Iran over the last 18 months, it can satisfy the Arab world, and force Washington to compromise in the region.

It is obviously no coincidence that on Dec. 22 Moscow indicated that it would fully support UNSC Resolution 598 on the same day that Washington was allowing a toughly worded Security Council resolution against Israel to be voted up (the United States abstained).

After Weinberger

A crucial element in the Soviets' bargaining advantage was the fall resignation of U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, over his opposition to the INF deal later signed in Washington. Toward the Gulf, Weinberger had elaborated a strategy to lay the basis for a credible and permanent military presence in the region to protect the regular flow of oil. Besides the deployment of the U.S. task force, which was completed between July and September with the arrival of minesweepers, Weinberger's Washington had entered into a series of discreet negotiations for an enlarged presence of naval and ground forces in a perimeter stretching from Egypt to the Gulf of Oman and the Gulf itself. That also included the establishment of floating military bases in the Gulf, with large barges or tankers.

Only weeks after his resignation, that strategy has been reversed. Under Frank Carlucci, Weinberger's successor, the U.S. task force is being contained to the role of useless policeman, protecting only U.S.-flagged ships—let the others sink. At the same time, the policy of threatening offensive retaliation against Iran has been abandoned.

Instead, American policy is now based on three principles, coherent with broader negotiations with the Soviet Union.

- First, to tackle the question of the Gulf war only within a framework which is acceptable to Moscow: the United Nations.

- Second, to reopen channels of negotiations between Washington and Teheran, even at the expense of other regional allies.

- Third, to contain the U.S. task force within the role of naval policeman, while encouraging other nations to take more military responsibility.

In short, within the space of one year, U.S. policy has shifted from an offensive strategy originally committed to maintaining peace, including at the risk of a confrontation with Iran, to a policy of disengagement, in which the American military presence amounts to the use of "made-in-U.S.A." weapons by all sides.

What may be considered by some Washington bureaucrats as a clever strategy, is in fact a disaster of the first order. It only confirms the fears of most of the countries of the region. They were hesitant to join with the United States militarily in the first place, because they suspected that Washington would abandon them. The process leading up the INF summit has only confirmed that fear.

Soviet giant steps in Gulf

Consider that, as of mid-1985, the Soviet Union had no diplomatic relations in the Gulf except with Kuwait. Consider also that, as of January 1987, a Soviet military presence in the Gulf was unthinkable, and might have been considered in other times a *casus belli*, equivalent to a permanent Soviet presence in the channel between France and Britain. Yet, aside from Saudi Arabia, with which only informal ties exist, Soviet diplomats are now all over the place, backed by large political and economic delegations.

In November, Moscow signed a deal for the construction of an auto factory in Bahrain. Since the spring of 1987, Gulf banks have been fighting each other to invest in the Soviet economy, following a deal between the Soviet state bank and a consortium of Kuwaiti banks in May.

With its own military presence amounting to a few destroyers and minesweepers, it is easy for Moscow to offer to withdraw its own forces, provided everyone else withdraws, too, and a U.N. peacekeeping force is sent in. The Russians have created a series of openings which have put them in the best position to bargain.

And, Moscow has a trump card which Washington cannot oppose; it alone can negotiate with both Baghdad and Teheran. Outside of the Arab League mediating committee chaired by Algeria, Yuli Vorontsov was the only high official to be able to travel between Baghdad and Teheran.

Despite popular propaganda, Iran has been drawing ever closer to the Soviet Union since last summer. The Iranian mullahs, of course, whatever factions they belong to, know how to use their relations with Moscow to get a better offer from the American officials they are meeting with regularly in Geneva.

However, Iran-Soviet cooperation has become quite concrete. In early October, Moscow made it clear that any American attacks against the Iranian mainland would activate the 1921 treaty between Moscow and Teheran, which allows the Soviets to intervene when Iran is attacked from the outside. Taking note, American warships wasted their shells on a small oil platform used by the Iranian pasdarans, the only retaliation in the face of the *casus belli* represented by Iranian attacks on U.S. ships. Needless to say, the Iranians themselves do not appreciate Moscow's promised protection too much. They are pushing for a revision of the treaty. However, Iran continues to enjoy the promise of protection, which ultimately gives Teheran a free hand in its war with Iraq. In the final analysis, did Iran really pay any penalty for the July 30 riots in Mecca?

Can Moscow keep its relationship with Teheran if it joins with the United States in a new Security Council resolution? It will require some diplomatic acrobatics. But what is ultimately the real aim? Neither Washington nor Moscow wants an end to the Gulf war just now. Both, for regional considerations, as well as the potential use of the Gulf war to manipulate the oil price and world financial markets, want to keep it going.

In a position of self-induced weakness, the State Department wants to cut its losses, and maintain its present political relationship in the region, without upsetting the cuts in its defense budget. To reach that goal, it has decided to sell a few Stinger missiles to Bahrain, and some 60 of the old version of the F-15 jetfighter to Saudi Arabia. In early 1988, it will also negotiate the creation in Egypt, with Saudi financing, of large factories to produce American military hardware, which could be marketed in the Middle East and Islam-

ic world generally.

Potentially, Washington will sign with Cairo an agreement similar to the one signed on Dec. 15 between the new defense secretary, Frank Carlucci, and Israel's Yitzak Rabin. Likewise, it will encourage the Egyptians to get more involved in the Gulf itself. It is considered that the American public will have little reaction if Egyptian soldiers die doing what the U.S. Marines should have done.

Having negotiated with Moscow for Pakistani troops to be deployed at the Afghan border to control the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen, Washington is also encouraging Cairo to send troops into Saudi Arabia to replace the 10,000 Pakistani troops which are being withdrawn. Bowing to economic "realities" and Soviet pressures, Washington wants proxies to do its job.

No doubt, many of these proxies will think twice before doing the job. Reality is expected to speak for itself in early 1988, when Iran launches its new offensive, and perhaps extends the war through such actions as an attack on Kuwait's Bubiyan Island. How will the military agreements among members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Dec. 14 agreement between Egypt and Kuwait, be implemented? Will the United States, still present in the Gulf, just sit back and watch, or run to the U.N. for a new resolution? If that occurs, Washington will be totally discredited.

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