

Maelstrom in the Gulf

The current crisis-ridden state of the imperialist world order has created a dangerously swirling maelstrom in the Persian (or Arab) Gulf. Three hundred thousand people have been killed in the war between Iran and Iraq that has already gone on for four years.

The climbing insurance premium for navigation in these warm waters is a commercial but ominous metaphor for the scale of the centripetal forces that threaten to hurl conflicting interests at one another in an explosive confrontation at the centre of this maelstrom. Press accounts refer to the alleged "neutrality" and "shared concerns" of the U.S. and the Soviet Union with regard to the Iran-Iraq war. U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz was quoted recently as saying that the Iran-Iraq war is the one issue that had not become "part of the East-West conflict. We have some differences of interest, but basically both we and the Soviets want to see the international waters remain open." The reader would have to be suffering from amnesia not to recall that the same authoritative representatives of both rival blocs have been vehemently denouncing each other's government for belligerence, power projection, provocation, disturbing the peace, etc., in the region. Both the U.S. (along with its Western allies) and the Soviet Union share the responsibility for the carnage and the continuing misery caused by the war, even more so than those immediately conducting it.

The resounding collapse of the feudal-comprador regime of the Shah under the revolutionary onslaught of the Iranian people in February 1979 sent political tremors pulsating throughout the Middle East. After decades of unbridled tyranny, brutal exploitation and national subjugation, a well-groomed and protected U.S. protégé, the fascist Shah, barely managed to flee the country with his

throne in flames. A gaping hole was blown open in the U.S. regional network of vassal states and faithful lackeys. What had been for so long billed as "an island of stability" was ablaze; the whole society was sprung free of the Shah's bloody reign and U.S. control.

Although the proletariat could not place itself politically at the head of the march of events, a tremendous revolutionary ferment nonetheless was underway; all classes and social strata victimised and plundered by foreign capital were actively participating in the revolutionary process. Understandably, this social upheaval and the demise of a prototype puppet did not sit well with the imperialists and their vassal states. What was a jubilant sight for the oppressed worldwide was no doubt a chilling one evoking images of future "horrors" for the oppressors.

The objective conditions were present in Iran for the proletariat to wage a struggle for political power. The opening was enhanced by inter-imperialist rivalry while simultaneously aggravating it by wrenching a strategic piece of territory away from contending imperialists who desperately needed to get hold of it not only for plunder but also for overall geopolitical reasons. Thus, for the imperialists, the situation was not only extremely sensitive but also called for even more aggressive prodding and manoeuvring.

The damage inflicted to U.S. interests in the region by the Iranian revolution and the weakness of the genuine proletarian forces there gave the Soviet Union cause to hope it could advance its interests through the new opening. But they too, as well-seasoned international exploiters, had their apprehensions about the revolutionary storm that broke loose on their very borders. Besides, the Soviet Union had learned to live with the Shah to some extent, par-

ticularly toward the end. There were even certain joint economic ventures such as the 1975 IGAT-II agreement to export massive amounts of natural gas to the Soviet Union.

U.S. and the USSR

The U.S. imperialists felt the urgency to announce, with as much clamour as they could muster, the regional ramifications of its Carter Doctrine: the U.S. would not spare the use of military force, including nuclear weapons, to protect its strategic interests in the Gulf, were the Soviet Union to infiltrate the region destabilised by the Iranian revolution. The Soviet troops' invasion of Afghanistan, which occurred after the Iranian revolution, significantly accelerated the whirling of the maelstrom.

Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union, while issuing ultimatums to warn their opponent about the consequences of "power projection" into the so-called "power vacuum" in the Gulf, have been nevertheless manoeuvring to fill it by any possible means. It is the nature of such "vacuums" to attract imperialist powers. However, "the vacuum fillings" in the region had to be conducted according to the calculus of strategic interests and without undermining the overall considerations of the imperialists in the region and worldwide.

It has been well over four years since Iraqi troops attacked Iran in September 1980. Occurring within a volatile international situation, and in the midst of the so-called "hostage crisis," the mercenary mission of Iraq not only enjoyed Washington's support and blessings but figured prominently in the U.S. arsenal that could be deployed against both the revolution and possible Soviet gains in Iran. The U.S. options were limited. Any direct U.S. intervention would certainly have been met with massive

resistance in Iran and the consequent danger of a deepening of the revolution. The reaction of people around the world, including large sections in the U.S. itself, would have been predictable. Furthermore, such an intervention would have brought about a face-to-face confrontation with the Soviets. It is noteworthy that the USSR continues to loudly proclaim its adherence to the 1921 treaty with Iran calling for mutual defense in the event of aggression--despite the fact that the successive Iranian regimes have declared the treaty null and void.

Already a number of attempted CIA coups in Iran had misfired, including the infamous "hostage rescue operation" that ended in a humiliating miscarriage in the desert. The economic blockade imposed by the Western imperialists and the freezing of all Iranian deposits in U.S. banks by the Carter administration were all part of the variegated U.S. efforts to force Iran back into the fold. Set in this context, Saddam Hussein's mercenary services were indeed invaluable, not just to the U.S. and Western imperialists but to the Soviet social-imperialists as well.

The Iraqi invasion was an opportunity for the U.S. to try to recover its losses by destabilising the Khomeini regime, pressuring it into capitulation and creating favourable conditions for the pro-U.S. forces (in and out of the new regime) to stage a comeback. This way the U.S. hoped to put an end to the tumultuous period of social upheaval and revolutionary ferment by restoring the guardians of yore back to power and also saw an opening to increase its influence in Iraq as well. However, the complexity of the situation and the intensity of the imperialist contention in the region militated against the U.S. putting its full weight behind Iraq in this war, which would have risked pushing Iran decisively into the arms of the Soviets. It was not accidental that U.S. clients such as Israel, South Korea, Chile, Brazil, not to mention major imperialist U.S. allies such as Britain and W. Germany were--and still are--selling arms to Iran. Thus, by actively playing both sides of this war the U.S. tried to safeguard and advance its interests.

For a brief period at the beginning,

it was just and legitimate for Iran to wage a war against the Iraqi aggressors who were clearly aiding the imperialists to restore their stranglehold and to thwart revolution in Iran. Later on, with the counter-revolutionary forces in Iran consolidating their power around June 1981, the Iran-Iraq war lost any progressive character and became a completely unjust, reactionary war on both sides, opposed to the interests of the proletariat and peoples of both Iran and Iraq.

Fueling Both Sides

The Soviet Union, driven by its own imperialist necessities, also pursued a policy of arming and fueling both sides in this war, despite initially tilting towards Iran. It feverishly manoeuvred to exploit the economic and military difficulties of the Khomeini regime, particularly through the Tudeh Party and the Fedayeen (Majority), which were used to bolster the Soviet's influence in the regime by openly aiding the counter-revolutionary pogroms and the attacks upon the communists and the revolutionary masses. During this period, with the expectation of getting a foothold in Iran, the Soviets considerably reduced their military aid to Iraq (whose armed forces had been heavily dependent on Moscow), while providing military equipment and ammunition to the Khomeini regime, directly and indirectly, through its East-bloc allies and North Korea.

The execution of this war clearly has taken tremendous tolls on both sides. It should be pointed out that neither Saddam Hussein nor the Ayatollah Khomeini were mere innocent pawns in the hands of the contending imperialist powers. Khomeini took advantage of the war to clamp down on the revolution, legitimising the most reactionary measures in the name of national unity in order to consolidate his reactionary class rule. Saddam Hussein was also hopeful that the prosecution of the war would enable him to silence the opposition brewing among the country's Shiite majority and among the Kurds. What appeared to the prosecutors of the war at the beginning to be a way of achieving national unity under their class rule now stands as a major factor undermining

the stability of both regimes.

Cost of War

The war has taken close to 300,000 lives up to now, and neither Khomeini nor Saddam Hussein has any gains to show for it. Out of the 14 million population of Iraq 1.65 million men are now under arms fighting a war with no victory in sight. The Khomeini regime in turn has to reckon with more than 2 million people who have been uprooted from border towns and rendered homeless by Iraqi shelling.

With inflation running at 600%, extensive food rationing, payments on foreign loans frozen, the political cost of continuing this war is bound to reach explosive heights for the Islamic Republic. Having to pay 2 million rials to the families of war "martyrs" hardly testifies to the regime's success in rallying the Iranian people behind its "holy jihad." The Iraqi government has also resorted to cash payments of 160,000 dollars (U.S.) to the families of soldiers who have lost their lives in the war. Not confident of the Iraqi officers' loyalty (nor, apparently, his own brother's) Saddam Hussein has been replacing and rotating his commanders at the front. With thousands of deserters, the Khomeini regime has been facing similar problems at the front as well.

In spite of the bloody and costly stalemate that continues to exacerbate the internal political and economic contradictions of both sides, the political consequences of ending the war are not any safer for either of the regimes, since those who have been conducting the war will be held accountable by the people who have had to bear the misery of it. That is indeed part of the downward pull of the maelstrom spinning in the Gulf.

Brazen Hypocrisy

All of the imperialists, with brazen hypocrisy, now announce themselves "innocent" and "neutral" although they have actively fueled and encouraged the war right from the beginning. That being the case, they could not possibly be indifferent or impartial to its outcome. In fact, the vested interests of the imperialists from both blocs tend to favour a tilt towards Iraq. The U.S. has made it clear it will not tolerate Iraq's defeat,

which at the moment does not appear to fit too well with Soviet calculations either. This situation is also a product of the considerably revved up contention over influence in Iraq itself. The Soviet Union, which had reduced its arms shipments to Iraq since the beginning of the war, has now resumed delivery on its old promises along with providing 2 billion dollars worth of credits to Saddam Hussein.

The French imperialists have been quite active trying to reduce Iraq's dependence on the Soviet Union for its military supplies by supplying, most notably, Super-Entendard aircraft equipped with Exocet missiles, F-1 Mirages and Frelon helicopters. During the recent visit of Iraq's deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz to the West, the French government also agreed to rebuild Iraq's nuclear reactor destroyed by the Israeli air attack in 1981.

However, both the U.S. and the Soviets are still holding cards in Iran. Recently, Moscow held talks with a high-level delegation from Tehran. And in turn, after a two-day visit to Tehran, W. German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher said that Iran was ready for a dialogue with the West and "we should be receptive to this, for nothing would be more wrong than to isolate this big and important country."

Although it has been obvious for some time that an Iraqi victory is not really possible, Iran's victory, on the other hand, is particularly objectionable to the imperialists. With signs of exhaustion that need no deciphering, the further prolongation of the war also harbors dangers of drastic changes that can suddenly bring both blocs face to face in what they call a "horizontal escalation" of the war.

Since Iran repelled Iraqi troops back to the border, Saddam Hussein has been scurrying to find a way to "honourably" end the war. The fact that what Baghdad came up with was nothing but the escalation of war into the Gulf, by attacking oil tankers and installations, is an indication of the nature of the options left open in an ever tightening of the knot of contradictions in the region.

There are signs pointing to the existence of differing views within the

Khomeini regime regarding the war, which are closely connected to conflicting interest groups within the ruling Islamic Republican Party. The clerics are concerned, to say the least, about the deteriorating situation and the mounting opposition within the country, which will inevitably be further aggravated by the continuing war. Various statements from the representatives of the Iranian government indicate that the clerics might forego their insistence on the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and billions of dollars of war reparations payments as a condition of ending the war. All this could possibly lead to a winding-down or even the cessation of the war. However, the winding-down of the war ironically is only a manifestation of the tighter winding-up of the contradictions that gave rise to it in the first place. And it testifies not to the stability but the fragility of the situation in the region.

Revolutionary Opening

The desperation of the reactionary regimes faced with diminishing economic and political stability is increasing the prospects for preparing and waging revolutionary warfare against the regimes in power in the region. Such revolutionary developments are not only probable but already a source of growing fear for the region's puppet states. In both Iran and Iraq the reactionary regimes have met armed opposition in the Kurdish regions from revolutionary forces. Although the genuine Marxist-Leninist forces are not yet in leadership of the revolutionary struggle there, the possibility remains that these areas will play an extremely important role in the overall revolutionary process in the region. The war has, to a certain extent, kept the reactionary Iranian and Iraqi regimes from concentrating their forces against the Kurdish revolutionaries.

The Turkish regime, for example, has been increasingly worried about the "contamination" of the Kurdish region of Turkey adjacent to those in Iran and Iraq. The recent agreement between the fascist governments of Turkey and Iraq allows the Turkish army to cross the border into Iraq in order to help suppress the Kurdish insurgents in the area. Nothing speaks better to the weakness and the

panic of these regimes.

This counterrevolutionary pact is, however, also an insidious product of the intensifying inter-imperialist rivalry and war preparations in the region. The compulsion to increase the war preparedness of half a million Turkish troops, which can strike across borders with the consent of friendly neighbors (and already have twice since the Soviets' shoring up of Syria's military capacity during the bloody war in Lebanon), stems largely from the overall heightening of tension in the area and cannot be accounted for simply by the need to carry out counterinsurgency operations. Since the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war both imperialist blocs have considerably increased their military presence in the Middle East. Several divisions of Soviet troops are engaged in active combat duty in Afghanistan. Soviet warships more frequently cruise the warm waters. Syria provides a significant position for possible Soviet troop deployments and is already heavily armed by the Soviet Union.

In turn, the U.S. has established its Central Command (previously called the Rapid Deployment Force) with a capacity of 270,000 troops and a budget of 20 billion dollars. In Saudi Arabia and Oman, the U.S. has built billions of dollars worth of deep-water ports, landing strips, military hospitals and other military infrastructure that can facilitate U.S. troop movements. Even Kuwait received 82 million dollars from the U.S. to upgrade its air defence. Both blocs have been exploiting all of the different contradictions in the Gulf to gain ground at each other's expense, to position themselves most advantageously for the worst possibilities throughout the region. Whatever the immediate outcome of the Iran-Iraq war may be, the contradictions that gave rise to it will continue to intensify throughout the region, rendering the existing order ever more brittle in the face of blows from revolutionary struggles and the strains of rapidly mounting imperialist contention. Genuine revolutionary forces, if guided by scientific analysis, will certainly face prospects not only to grow in strength but to send many a crown spinning down the maelstrom in the Gulf. ■