

Soviet "Dove"

It was the U.S. and the West bloc more generally which played the instigating role in the Gulf war, in order to protect their imperialist interests in a region which they have dominated for decades. The Soviet Union has exposed and condemned this repeatedly. But though their own role has been more limited, it is every bit as imperialist; in fact, while piously posing as the real hope for peace in the Gulf, the Soviet social-imperialists have fueled the war from the beginning and are now increasingly trying to throw their weight around the region, to muscle in on an area where they were previously a more marginal imperial power, even as the Western bloc, led by the U.S., tries to strengthen its own position. Soviet spokesmen routinely note that the Gulf war "only serves imperialism" — they should know, since they are one of the main imperialists it serves.

While Gorbachev coos about peace in the Gulf, the USSR is one of the biggest suppliers of arms fueling this reactionary slaughter. The USSR is the main single supplier of arms to Iraq, substantially outdistancing France, which is second. Bombs which pound Iranian cities, shells which tear apart the Iranian frontline, missiles which sink the tankers in the Gulf — and Iraq has hit 50% more tankers than Iran since it initiated this phase of the war — all these weapons and more originate in the munitions depots of the social-imperialists.

Of course, the Soviets have no monopoly on hypocrisy in this matter. In May 1985, the U.S. State Department declared, "The U.S. does not permit U.S. arms and munitions to be shipped to either belligerent," even as it was carrying out its "Irangate" shipments and, more routinely, funneling billions of dollars worth of arms through

Israel, Saudi Arabia, China and other U.S. clients. This is a practice the U.S. developed over many years, supplying South Africa, Guatemala and other such international pariahs through clients like Israel.

But the Soviets have mastered the art of international arms trafficking equally well. One of the main suppliers of weapons to Iran, for instance, is *North Korea*, which in 1982 supplied over 40% of Iran's arms procurements — now who do you suppose supplies *their* weapons?! Syria, too, provides the Islamic Republic with weapons, also stamped "Made in the USSR." So while Gorbachev and Co denounce "the imperialists" for profiting from the bloodbath, these "doves" equal their counterparts in fueling the war on *both sides*. This simple fact is so damning of their hypocritical imperialist character that one will *never* find it published in the much trumpeted "glasnost" media (just as similar simple facts about Western arms sales are at most footnotes in the Western "free press").

It is particularly infuriating, then, to read arguments like that of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which informed readers of its monthly journal that: "... the imperialist countries are playing their role of war capitalists to the hilt — selling arms to one side or the other, or to both. In contrast to the Soviet Union, the capitalist countries are delighted to make money while Iran and Iraq destroy each other."² When facts don't convince, just too bad for the facts — this is the way the PFLP seeks to clean up the image of the imperialist USSR.

These extensive Soviet arms supplies to the belligerents are not primarily due to the simple search for profit on arms sales. One Soviet apologist, Fred Halliday, argues

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that Soviet arms supplies are different from those of the West because the USSR doesn't have a profit-oriented military-industrial complex. As proof, Halliday argues that the Soviets have probably even lost money on arms deals in the Middle East.³ Whatever he thinks now that Gorbachev has more openly than ever put profit in command of the Soviet economy, such "proof" only "proves" the author's own vulgar economic reasoning. Did the arch-imperialist Reagan calculate the bottom-line profit on the "Irangate" arms deliveries? Or did strategic reasoning dominate? And what about in Vietnam, where the U.S. poured tens of billions of dollars into a war for a country which was hardly a major source of super-profits in its empire? The Soviets themselves have experience with strategic, rather than narrowly economic calculation; Cuba, for instance, has been a basket-case economically for years, but whether or not it has brought net profits into the Soviet coffers, it has served not only directly to secure footholds in Angola and Ethiopia, where its puppet troops prop up Soviet neocolonies, but more generally to refurbish the Soviet's tarnished socialist image, especially in Latin America. Or what about the price of the war in Afghanistan itself?

Certainly profit-making by arms manufacturers selling to petrodollar-rich reactionary regimes has in fact been *one* factor pushing forward the steady military buildup in the region. But the underlying compulsion has never been the immediate profit margin, and now less so than ever.

Today, control of the Middle East, and especially the Gulf itself, is a key to world domination. Part of the basis of the Gulf's strategic importance has been petrol. Though

the West has taken serious measures to reduce its dependency on petrol, with some success, Gulf supplies continue to be vital to the Western economies, including particularly Japan, which gets two-thirds of its petrol from the Gulf region. The Persian Gulf contains 57 % of all the world's known oil reserves, and they will last far longer than those in the North Sea, Alaska, etc.⁴ The long lines which carry Gulf oil to the West are the jugular veins of the Western bloc.

But the blocs are not contending over immediate supplies of petrol. Contention over petrol is but a part of a larger dynamic of contention, especially military contention, which now looms over all else. The Mideast is the recipient of *over one-half of all Soviet and U.S. arms deliveries in the world*. Of the ten largest non-Soviet bloc recipients of Soviet foreign aid between 1954 and 1976, seven were in the Mideast, including Turkey, Afghanistan, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In the early 1970s, three countries (Egypt, Syria and Iraq) got over half of all Soviet military aid to non-Soviet bloc countries.⁵ In 1978-1982, Syria and Iraq, the two largest recipients of Soviet arms transfers, *each* received more Soviet arms than did *the entire Warsaw Pact together*.⁶ This enormous stockpiling of weapons by both blocs in the region has turned it into a tinderbox and reflects how vital the imperialists of both blocs consider this region, and, in turn, the deployment of this vast arsenal makes control of the Gulf region ever more imperative for each. The web of interests woven together especially by these weapons is today so tight that any step by one imperialist threatens to rupture the entire fabric in the region and hurtle the imperialists directly at each other.

Arms supplies are key in this contention, but they do not translate into direct imperialist domination. The Soviets rely heavily on direct military aid, and are less capable than the Western imperialists of using other means to penetrate these countries. But their efforts do include diplomatic, political and economic measures as well. They have, for instance, used their proximity to Iran to negotiate a recent deal which will open a pipeline and railroad traffic from Iran into the USSR, allowing Iran to export 700,000 barrels per day (bpd) of its current production of 1.7 million bpd.⁷ Such a measure goes beyond economic significance, for this will allow Iran to divert its exports from shipment through the Gulf and so diminish Iraq's ability to continue the "tanker war" and bring the Western imperialists onto the scene. This in turn puts the Western imperialists into a bind, for the more they allow Iraq to harass Iranian oil shipments — one of Iraq's chief means of parrying Iranian ground superiority — the more this puts pressure on the Islamic Republic to turn to these new ties with the Soviets.

Soviet diplomacy has sought to establish new diplomatic ties in the region, including with the United Arab Emirates and other reactionaries; the Soviets present themselves as a non-belligerent, peaceful, socialist superpower which can bring peace and stability to the region. They recently proposed that all foreign warships leave the Gulf — a proposal so safe that Brezhnev himself floated it out in 1980. And why not? The assumption underlying it is that the Soviet social-imperialists are at least equal arbiters of the region's destiny in an area where the U.S. and Western bloc has been dominant for deca-

des. Naturally these social-imperialist "doves" have not put forward eliminating all foreign naval vessels from the *Red Sea*, where they have recently established naval bases and positioning points on the coast of their Ethiopian neocolony, as well as in Aden in South Yemen.

Backing up the Soviet efforts to get its claws deeper into the various parts of the region is the direct Soviet military presence. In the waters of the Gulf, this is hardly on the same scale as that of the Western imperialists, yet the six Soviet warships there as of October 1987 — including a submarine depot ship, three minesweepers, one frigate and a destroyer — are by no means negligible. They are symbolic of a new, stepped-up Soviet presence in the region, a visible affirmation of the Soviets' diplomatic declarations that henceforth the USSR has a voice in the Gulf's destiny. Furthermore, they are part of the much larger force of fifteen to twenty Soviet ships normally stationed in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Even more importantly, the Persian Gulf has the distinct advantage for the Soviets of being within striking distance of the Soviet mainland and Afghanistan. Over 300,000 Soviet troops are stationed in the southern USSR and have been put on alert status at least at one point due to activity in the Gulf region. The Soviets also have nuclear missiles and numerous aircraft capable of reaching the Gulf in less than 30 minutes. This capability has been enhanced by the presence of 100,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan, who have, since the occupation, constructed airfields and other infrastructure in southern Afghanistan which would facilitate any Soviet military presence in the Gulf.⁸

In South Yemen in January 1986, Abdu-I-Fatah, who was called "the man of Moscow," staged a coup d'Etat and overthrew his comrades in power who were also pro-Soviet but had lingering ties with the West. This was a palace coup directed by Moscow aimed at consolidating its control of South Yemen, which amounts to little more than one big Soviet military base.

Yemen is one of the poorest

countries in the world, with a very small population. It is not attractive from the point of view of imperialist plunder. But it is located at a point that, especially these days, makes it impossible to ignore. It lies right on the principal sea-route connecting Europe and Asia, via the Red Sea and Suez Canal. It borders the Arabian Sea for more than 1000 kilometres. It controls the choke-point of the Red Sea itself. It has three islands (Perim, Kamaran and Socotra) positioned in the middle of these waterways on which the Soviets have built bases for their nuclear submarines. The Eden airport has been developed by the USSR to be fit for use in wartime or other emergencies. The operational radius of the forces on these bases is so extensive that they can threaten the key U.S. Indian Ocean base on Diego Garcia island.

The loans granted by the USSR provide 1/8 of the total financial resources of South Yemen; they are used mainly to maintain the bases. One thousand Russian military advisers oversee the South Yemen military forces; another 1,000 economic advisers direct its economy — this in a country of only 2 million. East Germans and Cubans also take part in this colonial setup, which goes so far that the South Yemen armed forces, which have been doubled in size recently, are now integrated into the Warsaw Pact. They are under the Pact Central Command, and receive their orders from Budapest!

All this mounts up to an impressive array of military might, but any Soviet military move into Iran would encounter serious difficulty, not the least of which might well be the resistance of the Iranian masses. The West has recently heavily built up Turkey as an extension of NATO to deal with Soviet moves, and the U.S. has developed the 200,000-strong Central Command to move rapidly into the region. Militarily troops in the Soviet south would be forced to cross the Zagros Mountains, with very narrow passes.⁹ It is here that the U.S. has publicly declared that it would attempt to halt a Soviet advance, including, it has said, with the use of nuclear weapons to block the

passes. Obviously such an eventuality threatens to broaden into global nuclear war with all the horror and destruction that portends.

Indeed, the strategic decision-makers of both blocs have already edged dangerously close to the brink once in the region. U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski writes in his memoirs of the period during the "hostage takeover crisis" in 1980: "By late August we had mounting intelligence that the Soviets were deploying forces on the Iranian border, in a mode suited for intervention in Iran." A "particularly sharp discussion" took place among government leaders "to assess the policy implications of the intelligence regarding a possible Soviet military intervention in Iran". "I argued that we should explicitly tell the Soviets that any Soviet military action would lead to a direct military confrontation with the United States. Muskie (then U.S. Secretary of State) offered the judgement that Congress would not feel that nuclear war was worth 7 percent of our oil, and Brown (then U.S. Secretary of Defense) rather sharply responded by asking what would happen if the Soviets invaded Iran and we did nothing. Did Muskie really believe that our losses would be only a percentage of our oil supply? Muskie reported that the American people might even accept the loss of Europe rather than risk nuclear war. I then joined in by asking Muskie if he accepted the proposition that the loss of the Persian Gulf might lead to the loss of Europe... In that case, I asked, isn't it vital that we deter the Soviets from moving into Iran?"¹⁰

Brzezinski tries to portray these developments as set in motion by Soviet deployments and threats of military intervention. The U.S. in fact had its own plans. Another Pentagon intimate reported that the Soviets got wind of a U.S. plan for military intervention in Iran and, "The KGB's 'best estimate' ... was that the United States was getting ready for military action, and the Soviets would have to meet force with force."¹¹ Another observer confirms that the Soviets feared a more major military intervention on the part of the U.S. during this

“hostage takeover crisis.” When the U.S. menaces were at their height in April 1980, just before the abortive helicopter rescue operation, the Soviets moved 50,000 troops in Afghanistan up to the Iranian border as a warning against U.S. direct intervention.¹² This same observer also reports that the Pentagon had developed plans for use of nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet takeover of Iran.¹³

What is clear from all this is that both imperialists were engaged in planning for a direct, major military confrontation in the event that the other were to take any major direct step into Iran. The Soviets certainly knew, or could guess, at U.S. planning and counter-planning, but nevertheless did not hesitate to undertake a mobilisation on a scale which posed the possibility of a U.S.-Soviet confrontation. Indeed, Soviet military doctrine recognises no brick wall between limited and nuclear war; as one exposition of Soviet military doctrine states: “There exists no insurmountable barrier or solid wall between a limited war and a world war. Each local adventure ... by the imperialists ... carries within itself the danger of escalation into a world war.”¹⁴ (Naturally, this isn’t said to pertain to the Soviets’ own “local adventure” in Afghanistan!)

The Soviets have presented themselves as the superpower which can guarantee peace and stability; they have exploited the broad exposure of the U.S. imperialists that exists, as well as the U.S.’ inability to prevent the collapse of the Shah, a fact which continues to give nightmares to the assorted sheiks and other reactionaries of the region.

But the social-imperialists’ own record could hardly give comfort. How much stability have they brought to Afghanistan? Who are they to talk about peace while waging a savage war of suppression to ensure their own imperial domination of that country?¹⁵

The Soviet Union is essentially in the position of digging in its claws, aiming to advance its tactical position right now and waiting for the U.S. and/or its major allies in the region to encounter difficulty, in order to scoop up whatever advan-

tage it can to strengthen its overall position in the Gulf. There is some basis for its hope: the situation of numerous U.S. client-states is deteriorating. There is strife between Sunni and Shi’ite in Kuwait; the Saudi Arabian regime, one of the most important for the West, is sitting on a tinderbox; U.S. influence in Iraq, relatively recent, is hardly consolidated, and the regime there is fragile in any case.

In Iran, too, time could offer the Soviets an opportunity. There is no guarantee that the U.S.’ manoeuvring in Iran, which relies heavily on gangster-style intimidation, can be kept easily in hand. One force which could certainly explode in the U.S.’ face — one more time — is the Iranian masses. In a situation where the Islamic Regime was threatened and turmoil erupted, this time with the U.S. having even less manoeuvring room in Iran than it did during the Shah’s overthrow, the Soviets might try to step in as a saviour of “stability” in Iran, perhaps in response to some “appeal” by pro-Soviet forces there.

While the social-imperialists might be eagerly anticipating the possibility of harvesting some fruit should disorder ripen in the region, it is far from certain that they could bring this under their control, or that they will even benefit at all.

In fueling the slaughter that has marked the region for seven years now, the imperialists have created a situation where the governments of that area are increasingly hated by their own war-weary people, exhausted of internal resources and riven by factions. The Chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee declared that “The dangers of a possible Iraqi collapse are greater than commonly understood ...” While the social-imperialists insist that “the war serves only imperialism,” the U.S. imperialists warn that “the perils of the United States in the Gulf are certain to increase.”¹⁶ While each is also referring to the danger of advances by the other, it is also this spectre, too, of mass upheaval that haunts the analysts of both imperialist blocs and puts pressure on both to seek some resolution of the Gulf

war — on the condition, and here’s the rub, that their own interests are safeguarded.

So, even while anticipating the eruption of disorder in the today Western-dominated Gulf, the Soviets too have their own imperial interests to protect in the region. The only disorder they support is disorder which can be controlled by them. The Soviets recently attempted to broker their own peace plan, as they did in 1970 in the Indian-Pakistani peace accord. This time the stakes are higher — and so far they have failed. The point of the accord the Soviets sought was to set themselves up as guarantors of order in the Gulf region, thus marginalising the West bloc; the Western imperialists immediately denounced it as trying to get around the “United Nations peace process,” which of course they are intent on dominating. All of which shows once again that, for both blocs, the only peace they find worth pursuing is one that advances their own imperialist interests. □

Footnotes

1. *The Iran-Iraq War*, by Ralph King
2. *Democratic Palestine*, July 1987, p. 28
3. *Threat from the East? Soviet Policy from Afghanistan and Iran to the Horn of Africa*, by Fred Halliday (Pelican Books: London, 1981), p. 46.
4. *Economist*, 8 August, 1987.
5. Halliday, p. 45.
6. “Soviet Arms Transfers,” Institute of Strategic Studies, p. 187.
7. *Middle East International*, 12 September, 1987.
8. *International Herald Tribune*, 27 August, 1987.
9. *The Soviet Union and Revolutionary Iran*, by A. Yodfat, p. 146.
10. *Revolutionary Worker* (RCP Publications; Chicago, USA), citing from *Power and Principle*, by Zbigniew Brzezinski.
11. Quoted in the *Revolutionary Worker* 10 August 1987.
12. Dilip Hiro, *Iran Under the Ayatollahs* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1985), p. 285.
13. Hiro, p. 326.
14. Milovidov and Kozlov, *Philosophical Heritage* (Moscow).
15. For more on the Soviets in Afghanistan, see *AWTW* No. 9, “Afghani Communists Expose Soviet Ploys”.
16. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Report, cited in *Revolutionary Worker*, 26 October 1987.