

~~SECRET~~ 54

Soviet Reaction to a US Military Presence  
in the Middle East

1. We have high confidence that Soviet reaction to even the prospect of a US military presence in the Middle East in any foreseeable context would be unreservedly and stridently negative. The Soviets have recently again made plain -- in a 12 August TASS article -- that they would regard any such proposal as a step hostile to their interests and as an additional American move away from detente. Their reaction would be reinforced by the conclusion that this was additional evidence of a calculated US effort to exclude the USSR from Middle East security arrangements, to disregard their interests and prestige in an area near Soviet borders, and to collude with their enemies.

2. The most plausible context for such a proposal would be some form of Israeli-Egyptian settlement. Soviet hostility to a settlement would be intensified by the prospect of a US military presence and they would see this as providing an issue around which to mobilize opposition to the settlement. They would seek to mount a vigorous diplomatic and propaganda campaign on this issue, which they would hope would receive wide resonance elsewhere in the Arab world. At the same time, the Soviets would hope by warnings about the military dangers involved to stimulate domestic US opposition.

3. Soviet prospects for capitalizing on the issue to improve their position would depend on the reactions of the key Arab leaders, especially Syrian President Assad. Assad might interpret any Camp David progress as a US-engineered sellout of Syria by Cairo, and his opposition to any US military presence would then be vociferous. The Soviets would encourage the Syrians and other Arab states to take the lead in mounting a campaign against what they would claim to be the return of Western colonialism to the Middle East. This position would also enable the Soviets to contend that US hypocrisy in opposing the introduction of foreign forces into Third World disputes (as in Africa) had been fully exposed.

4. Although the Soviets would exploit Arab opposition in order to strengthen their own military influence and presence,

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~ [REDACTED]

they would place the emphasis on excluding US presence more than on seeking to augment their own. The Soviets know that Egypt, Israel, and the US consider a Soviet military presence in the Sinai unacceptable. The USSR therefore probably considers its October 1973 proposals for a joint military presence to be a dead letter. The Soviets might, however, propose as an alternative a multinational peacekeeping force that excluded both US and Soviet participation, but only to guarantee a settlement acceptable to the other Arabs in the negotiation of which the Soviets themselves had a role.

5. On balance, Soviet opposition alone probably would not critically affect the prospects of success or failure for a US-brokered Egyptian-Israeli agreement that was guaranteed in some way by a US military presence. But fierce Soviet opposition would strengthen the will of other Arabs who, in their own interests, regarded the agreement as unacceptable. This Soviet opposition might drive left-out Arab states in the direction of giving the USSR a larger military role in the region.

- 2 -

~~SECRET~~ [REDACTED]