

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SOVIET
POWER PROJECTION ACTIVITIES

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Power Projection Activities

1. Throughout the last decade the Soviets have pursued a policy of expanding and strengthening their global reach and influence, including greater use of support facilities overseas, more frequent naval and air presence at longer ranges, and the pursuit of increased operational experience in distant areas.* This expansion has been complemented by Soviet surrogate force deployments and military aid to client states and to revolutionary movements in politically unstable areas. While the principal theaters of Soviet focus appear to be in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, Soviet reach extends westward via Cuba, where they maintain a permanent brigade base, to the Central American mainland. It also stretches southward along both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean coasts of Africa. Facilities on the Arabian Peninsula and islands of the Indian Ocean provide sustenance on an aperiodic basis to Soviet naval and air units.

2. In the Near East and South Asia, the Soviets currently can politically rely on use of facilities in Afghanistan, Syria,

*The word "facilities" is used in this paper instead of "bases" to denote the tenuous nature of most Soviet overseas staging points. With the exception of Soviet Army barracks in Cuba, and possibly in Syria, Soviet facilities overseas are not comparable with the well-developed network of bases used by US forces.

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the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), and Ethiopia. There is a possibility that they may also gain access to air and maritime facilities in Libya. In the case of Syria they have direct control of air defense systems, including SA-5 surface-to-air missiles, which provide them a capability against hostile aircraft over Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, part of Turkey, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Strategically, this situation means the Soviets can control the southern entrance to the Red Sea from the PDRY and Ethiopia, and at least contest US air and naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean from facilities in that area. They are not currently in a position to completely control the Straits of Hormuz, but they could launch strikes in the area using long range aircraft from the Soviet Union.

3. In the Pacific, where the Soviets maintain their largest fleet, their interest in overseas support development centers on Vietnam, particularly the facilities at Cam Rahn and the airfield at Da Nang. Soviet sponsorship of the Hanoi regime affords at once a modicum of encirclement of China and a vantage point from which operations could be undertaken along the vital international sea lanes stretching across the Indian Ocean, northward via the South China Sea to Japan.

4. The leverage which the Soviets realize from these as yet modest deployments is highly significant. From a military point of view they have acquired a number of actual and potential staging points from which intelligence and logistical missions

can be regularly mounted, and they have laid the foundations upon which, with additional investment, regional offensive strike capabilities could be built. Soviet long-range aircraft often reconnoiter Atlantic waters from the Barents Sea to the Caribbean and southward to Luanda, Angola. East of Africa, Soviet transport flights stretching southward across the Arabian Sea to the Seychelles and Mozambique are possible precursors of new military operational routes. Of particular concern in this developing network is the growing Soviet potential for interfering with established air and sea lanes which US and NATO Allies have heretofore used with impunity. Facilities in Cuba stand immediately adjacent to US force reinforcement lanes leading from the Gulf of Mexico to Europe and international trade routes transiting the Panama Canal. African facilities from which the Soviets might stage are well within bomber and naval unit striking range of shipping channels rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Further to the east, Cam Rahn Bay is less than 900 miles from the vital strait of Malacca, easily reached by long range air, surface or sub-surface forces. While the facilities are modest at many of the sites, and Soviet naval or air units are continuously present at only a few of them, these outposts could be rapidly reinforced from the Soviet Union with sufficient force to mount hostile operations against Western interests for a limited period of time. No less important, and possibly more pressing is the fact that nearly every plan for long-distance movement of US equipment or forces must now consider rerouting delays or the accompaniment of escorting units in periods of crisis because of these widespread Soviet combatant forces.

5. There are also more subtle advantages realized by the Soviets by the magnitude and visibility of their efforts. Many Soviet client states selected for substantial support enjoy a measure of regional prominence from their association with a superpower. Soviet support, usually manifested in arms deliveries, reinforces the often swaggering confidence of some politically radical states, particularly in their early stages of development. This tends to encourage aggressiveness, intimidate more moderate neighbors and create an atmosphere of crisis and impending revolutionary change. Soviet diplomacy and covert actions are well designed to exploit opportunities born of such circumstances. In some cases the Soviets realize substantial economic benefit for their efforts, primarily through sales of arms and related goods which constitute their second largest source of hard currency.

6. Looking ahead, there are a number of other expansive and exploitative actions which the Soviets could take, detrimental to Western interests, building upon their recent activity. First, we must consider the further physical development of the facilities (extension of runways, construction of wharfage, additional fuel and munitions storage, etc.). They may also choose to preposition certain war materiel for their own or client use. Second, the Soviets probably wish to further secure and liberalize their landing rights and naval privileges through more broadly drawn treaties and understandings with the host

governments. Third, they could begin to experiment with the deployment of more capable aircraft, ships and submarines, perhaps accompanied by air defense systems and support personnel. Fourth, we might see more frequent joint exercises between the Soviets and the forces of the host governments, perhaps with greater emphasis upon assumption by the host forces of a number of the functions previously performed by the Soviets.

7. In the longer time frame, the Soviets may be tempted to permanently station forces, perhaps equipped with surface-to-surface and long range surface-to-air missiles at these outposts to provide a standing threat to selected areas and traffic choke points. Whether permanently stationed or rapidly deployed, Soviet forces could pose a significant problem to US contingency force deployments, especially in view of the likelihood of time as a critical factor to ensure arrival of the force in the threatened theater before a deteriorating situation assumed irreversible proportions. Such circumstances might pertain if forces of the US Central Command were to be ordered to the Persian Gulf region in response to movements of hostile forces into Iran, toward the Straits of Hormuz, or via Iraq toward the Arabian Peninsula. While it is unlikely in this century that the Soviets would be able to develop a capability for sustained hostilities with the United States at great distance from their homeland, they may reckon that the time to be gained by delay of US reinforcements through sharp, interdictive action would be well worth the sacrifice of their relatively small numbers of

forward deployed forces. US strategy in all principal theaters is heavily dependent upon rapid reinforcement from the Western Hemisphere, and any time lost by hostile interdiction and a necessity to fight the way through may be critical to success.

8. In sum, while their efforts are by no means comparable to US forward basing patterns, the Soviets do appear to be steadily increasing their ability to delay US reinforcement of critical theaters around the Eurasian landmass in time of crisis. In addition, they have developed a network of widespread outposts and areas which support their avowed goal of world revolution. While some of the posts are of greater importance and utility than others, in their entirety they constitute a major challenge to planners charged with ensuring Western security.

NIO/GPF
21 March 1983

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