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CORD MEYER

CONSOLIDATING EVERY ADVANCE

General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev knows how to speak softly about the need for nuclear disarmament and has improved the Soviet image in the West by a more civilized tone of voice. But where Soviet power and prestige are at stake in the Third World, Mr. Gorbachev has proved that he carries a very big stick and is quite prepared to use it.

From Afghanistan to South Yemen, from Angola to Ethiopia, from Cuba to Nicaragua, the new Soviet leader has now demonstrated his determination to consolidate every geopolitical advance made by his predecessors and to tolerate no backsliding from one-party Marxist regimes, where they have been established.

The announced Reagan Doctrine of providing support to anti-Communist guerrillas and freedom fighters in nations temporarily under Marxist rule now confronts a hard reality. The Kremlin is prepared to raise the ante and to provide huge additional supplies of modern armament and expert military advice to beleaguered Communist regimes in the underdeveloped world.

On the basis of a case-by-case analysis, Reagan officials have reluctantly come to the conclusion that since the Geneva summit, there is no evidence that the Soviet general secretary has backed away from any of the regional confrontations about which the American president warned him.

In Afghanistan, the ambiguous Russian hints at Geneva about a willingness to compromise have proved totally misleading. A steady improvement in Soviet armament and tactics endangers the Afghan resistance, while Soviet bombing across the border and bribing of dissident tribes within Pakistan make the Pakistani government even less willing to allow the delivery of effective anti-aircraft weaponry to the guerrillas.

The strategic rewards of victory and the fear of the consequences of withdrawal have apparently persuaded Mr. Gorbachev to escalate a war that he did not start.

In the recent bloody infighting among Communists in South Yemen that left more than 10,000 dead in the ruins of Aden, the Kremlin hesitated only momentarily before intervening effectively on the side of the hard-line Marxist rebels by providing them with critical intelligence and with technical support to the air force. Mr. Gorbachev was prepared to take no chances with a Communist regime that he judged to be less than totally reliable.

In Angola, a similar hardening of the Soviet line and escalation of military force is described by Jonas Savimbi during his current visit to Washington to obtain U.S. support for the UNITA guerrillas. American intelligence confirms Mr. Savimbi's warning that the Soviets are preparing for a massive new assault this spring on UNITA's main southern base with a combination of modern Soviet armament, Cuban troops, and Portuguese mercenaries.

In Ethiopia, the Soviets have continued to supply the Marxist regime of Chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam with the arms necessary to contain the tribal revolts, while the West tries to feed the starving millions who have fled the drought and the enforced relocation and collectivization. Through the Ethiopian regime, the Soviets are also sending arms to support Col. John Garang's rebellion in the southern Sudan in order to destabilize the shaky military government in Khartoum.

Since Mr. Gorbachev took over the reins in Moscow, the Soviets in Nicaragua have sharply escalated the quality and quantity of their military assistance to the Sandinista regime. Steady encroachments on the few remaining rights of the Catholic Church and the internal democratic opposition have been combined with

the commitment of Cuban-manned Soviet helicopter gunships in the fighting against the "contras," who now receive only non-lethal aid from the United States.

In the face of this Gorbachev offensive that depends so heavily on raw military force, President Ronald Reagan is faced with serious dilemmas in trying to give the freedom fighters the weapons they desperately need to have a chance of dislodging the radical dictatorships they oppose.

In agreeing to help freedom fighters in Angola and Nicaragua, the neighboring countries through which the American assistance would have to pass to reach the guerrillas cannot permit the openly acknowledged delivery of U.S. military aid across their borders. The governments of Zaire and Honduras would both insist upon the protection of deniability and would require that any American arms be shipped secretly.

Since the chairmen of both the Senate and House intelligence committees have publicly stated their opposition to covert military funding, President Reagan faces big problems on the Hill if he attempts to channel arms secretly to Mr. Savimbi's guerrillas and to the "contras" in Nicaragua.

Moreover, the draconian impact of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings will make it even more difficult to persuade the Congress to commit the resources necessary to begin to match the Soviet effort.

The Reagan Doctrine is in deep trouble, and only the man who announced it can now save it by a strong personal campaign for non-partisan support.