

U.S. Officials Remain Skeptical

Soviets May Be Curtailing Third World Adventures

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By **ROBERT C. TOTH**, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—The Soviet Union, which has not launched any new adventures in the Third World since its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, may be abandoning its long-standing policy of abetting "national liberation movements" around the globe, according to academic experts on the Soviet Union.

Many of these experts contend that economic troubles at home, a desire for improved relations with the United States and the instability of some of the client states in the Third World, such as South Yemen and Ethiopia, have curbed the Kremlin's appetite for new adventures abroad.

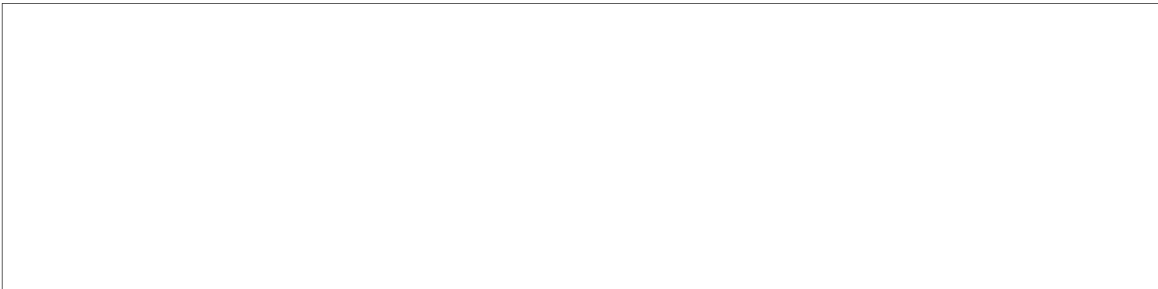
Whatever the reason, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, who became the top Soviet leader last year, has toned

down the inflammatory rhetoric of his predecessors and openly hinted at the wish to disengage.

He has referred to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan as a "bleeding wound," for example, suggesting that he wants to resolve this regional conflict. And his announcement Monday that Moscow will withdraw six regiments of its 115,000 men from Afghanistan as a gesture "to speed up political settlement" is regarded by some as an important diplomatic move, though it is easily reversible, that will not handicap the Soviets' conduct of their anti-guerrilla war and will not necessarily lead to Soviet disengagement.

But U.S. officials remain skeptical. State Department spokesman

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Bernard Kalb pointed out that "similar withdrawals announced in the past were part of regular troop rotation without any reductions in the total numbers of Soviet troops in Afghanistan."

And hard evidence that the Soviets generally have embarked on a more moderate foreign policy remains sketchy.

"Actual Soviet behavior," said Francis Fukuyama, a Rand Corp. analyst specializing in Soviet-Third World issues, "continues to be extremely competitive."

"It won't be retrenchment like the United States after Vietnam," Fukuyama predicted. "Moscow will concentrate (its aid) on existing clients, where there would be major negative consequences if it withdrew, but will not look for new opportunities in the Third World."

A State Department official agreed. "The Soviets would probably like to withdraw a little to catch their breath," he said, "but we've seen that they are also not going to allow themselves to be pushed out of important client states. We may push, but they'll push back."

Regimes Challenged

The Reagan Administration is pushing. In a little-noticed message to Congress this spring, Reagan said that the Kremlin had "overreached" in the 1970s and now requires "international calm to deal with its internal problems." Meanwhile, he said, anti-Soviet insurgencies in the Third World provide new opportunities for "democratic revolution."

"Growing resistance movements now challenge Communist regimes installed or maintained by the military power of the Soviet Union and its colonial agents—in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia and Nicaragua," he declared. "We did not create this historical phe-



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nomenon, but we must not fail to respond to it."

The United States is now providing major aid to anti-Soviet insurgencies in Angola, Afghanistan and Nicaragua and may be actively involved elsewhere as well.

"In certain key respects," Fukuyama has written, "the United States and the Soviet Union are in the process of reversing roles in the Third World. What is new is the number and seriousness of the opportunities for American-sponsored threats to the status quo."

In Gorbachev's address to the Communist Party Congress in February, strikingly absent were the standard Soviet pledges to support "national liberation struggles" in the Third World. Instead, the new Soviet leader called for bold new

thinking and remarked that it was no longer tolerable for the Soviet foreign minister to be known to the world as "Mr. Nyet."

And in June, when Gorbachev wrote to President Reagan about issues the two nations should address, he mentioned "the regional conflicts going on in the world," Reagan said. Until now, the issue of regional conflicts has been put on U.S.-Soviet summit agendas only at American insistence.

Two noted U.S. Kremlinologists, Seweryn Bialer and Joan M. Affrica of Columbia University, wrote recently that Gorbachev appears "more realistic" than the late leader Leonid I. Brezhnev about the use of military power.

In an article in "Foreign Affairs," Bialer and Affrica predicted that Gorbachev will continue the Soviets' military intervention in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Angola because Soviet credibility is on the line there. But he is also not likely to risk new foreign adventures, they said, because the Soviet Union is already overextended and, in view of the Reagan Administration's greater assertiveness in the world, the risks of new military adventures far exceed those of the 1970s.

Conflicts in Asia

Many Soviet experts in Europe agree with this view. Prof. Boris Meissner of West Germany's Cologne University wrote recently that Gorbachev's "wish to defuse the existing conflicts in Asia," including ending the Afghanistan incursion, represents "another indication of more restraint in the Soviet Union's global foreign policy strategy."

Skeptics warn, however, that Gorbachev may be merely trying to put the West off guard. That the Kremlin has not embarked on any new enterprises in the Third World

since its 1979 Afghan invasion may be more because of lack of opportunity than because of a deliberate policy, they say, and new Soviet incursions cannot be ruled out if the reward is sufficiently great.

Despite the lure of improved U.S.-Soviet relations, for example, the Soviets might be tempted to intervene in Iran after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's rule ends or to provide arms to black nationalists in southern Africa if the South African government appears threatened with collapse.

The Soviets have had major wins and losses in the former colonial world since World War II, when Moscow began with no friends or allies in those areas. The two gravest disappointments were China's disaffection and the loss of Egypt. But Cuba, Vietnam and North Korea represent the oldest and most firmly established victories, and 13 other lesser client nations call themselves Marxist-Leninist.

The best example of recent Soviet restraint, Fukuyama said, is Mozambique, where the Marxist government in Maputo signed a nonaggression pact with South Africa in 1984, probably because Moscow failed to protect it against South Africa despite the "friendship and cooperation" treaty between the two nations. "Soviet passivity has allowed Maputo to gradually slide into the South African orbit," he said.

Elsewhere, Moscow's behavior has been more ambivalent. In Libya, the Soviets stayed out of the crossfire between the United States and Libyan strongman Moammar Kadhafi that climaxed in the U.S. raid on Tripoli and Benghazi in April. They publicly criticized Kadhafi's brand of terrorism, but they also quickly resupplied the long-range surface-to-air missiles and other arms destroyed by U.S.

warplanes.

Even in Afghanistan, despite Gorbachev's professed desire to end the war, the Soviets have replaced Babrak Karmal in Kabul with Najib, who seems willing to risk expanding the war into Pakistan with deliberate cross-border aircraft incursions and terrorist bombings against Afghan rebel bases there.

Moscow itself has threatened Pakistan, ostensibly to prevent it from developing a nuclear device, in a manner so brash that the United States felt compelled to remind the Soviets of its commitment to Pakistan's security. Yet now, Gorbachev has offered the withdrawal of six regiments—between 6,000 and 10,000 men, by Western estimates—to speed up the peace process.

More for Cuba

And in some corners of the globe, the Soviets seem more aggressive than ever. Despite economic problems at home, their aid to Vietnam, North Korea, and Syria has not slackened, and Cuba recently announced that it will receive a 50% boost in Soviet economic credits for the next five years. Cuba had been getting \$4 billion a year in economic aid plus \$1 billion a year in military aid, according to U.S. estimates.

The increase for Havana could be ominous. The last major rise in Soviet aid occurred between 1976 and 1979, when Soviet aid jumped almost three-fold as Cuban troops began serving as Soviet proxies in Angola, Ethiopia and other African and Latin American nations.

In other regions, too, the Soviets have not let up.

—In Angola, after a major offensive by the U.S.-backed insurgents, Soviet aid to the Marxist regime has increased. The size of the Cuban force there has doubled in

recent years. "When we upped the ante, they did, too," said one U.S. official, "as if Gorbachev cannot afford to be shown to have lost Angola."

—In Nicaragua, the Soviets have guaranteed oil supplies and extended new economic credits to the Sandinista regime since Gorbachev took over, and for the first time they are shipping materiel directly from their ports without going through Cuba. New military supplies include 12 new transport helicopters that can be equipped as gunships and the temporary assignment of an Aeroflot aerial mapping plane.

—Even in the South Pacific, long a "U.S. lake," the Soviets have entered into an uneconomic fishing agreement with Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert Islands) and established diplomatic relations with Vanuatu, another new island nation. The "Asian and Pacific direction," Gorbachev told the party congress, is taking on "ever growing importance" in Soviet foreign policy.

Beyond economic and military assistance to the Third World, the Soviets continue to develop a major "force projection" capability that would allow its own troops to intervene far from their shores. Once the Soviet Union maintained a coastal defense navy, but now Soviet fleets sail all oceans with small aircraft carriers and major landing vessels.

Since Soviet pilots flew in the Yemen civil war in 1967, Soviet military personnel have been dispatched to Cuba, Angola, Ethiopia and Vietnam and are now fighting in Afghanistan. The Soviets, wrote Rand analyst Harry Gelman, have "incrementally" achieved a far-flung political and military presence in the underdeveloped world."