

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 32

WALL STREET JOURNAL

15 December 1986

U.S. Foreign-Policy Drift Could Allow Soviets to Widen Third World Inroads

WASHINGTON INSIGHT

By JOHN WALCOTT

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—The Iran arms scandal threatens to plunge U.S. foreign policy into a period of self-criticism and drift at a time when the Soviet Union appears to be mounting a campaign to expand its influence in the Third World.

Revelations about the byzantine network of U.S. officials and middlemen that secretly sold arms to Iran and diverted some of the profits to Nicaraguan rebels threaten to destroy public and congressional support for Mr. Reagan's aggressive anticommunist policies.

Congress has lifted restrictions on aid to rebels in Angola and Nicaragua, but the debate over U.S. support for anticommunist rebels still rages. The issue transcends questions of whether Mr. Reagan was bamboozled by the Iranians and whether administration officials broke the law by funneling money to the Nicaraguan Contras. Whatever the answers, the debate over whether and how to combat Soviet advances in the Third World will remain.

Seeking Better Relations

Indeed, the question will become more pressing if, as some Sovietologists suspect, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev is taking more important Third World nations more seriously than his predecessors did. Mr. Gorbachev appears to be listening to Karen Brutents, a foreign-policy strategist on the staff of the Communist Party's Central Committee. Mr. Brutents argues that the Soviet Union should seek better relations with Mexico, Argentina and other countries whose relations with the U.S. are strained by economic problems and other troubles.

Mr. Gorbachev recently returned from India, a longtime ally, and he will try to strengthen ties with Mexico in a visit early next year. The Soviets recently upgraded economic ties with Argentina. And in Chile, U.S. intelligence analysts believe, Moscow has encouraged local communists to step up armed attacks on Gen. Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship.

Soviet military aid to the governments of Angola and Nicaragua has increased this year, despite Moscow's economic woes. Finally, in Iran, increased Soviet intelligence activities, arms sales and new economic ties helped prompt Israeli, U.S. and perhaps even some Iranian officials to try to improve relations between Tehran and Washington.

Confronting communism was simpler 30 years ago. The arenas were usually more familiar, often places of unquestioned im-

portance to the West—Berlin, say, or Cuba. The rules were different. When leaders unpalatable to the West took power in Iran or Guatemala, the Central Intelligence Agency removed them. When the Kremlin sponsored an insurgency in Greece, President Truman sent military aid to the Greeks. When Soviet tanks rolled up to Checkpoint Charlie, American gunners met them, toe-to-toe.

Less-Familiar Places

Now the East-West competition has shifted to less familiar—and, many argue, less important—places: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Nicaragua. Instead of employing tanks or blackmail, as they did in Eastern Europe, the Soviets have learned to use a mixture of military power (Afghanistan), military aid (Nicaragua, Angola and Vietnam), proxy forces (Angola), covert action (Iran) and traditional political and economic diplomacy.

The president's effort to replace the Cold War policy of containment with an aggressive attempt to roll back communism in the Third World, the so-called Reagan Doctrine, relies on covert support for designated "freedom fighters," such as the anti-Soviet mujahideen in Afghanistan.

Now, investigators are poking into secret bank accounts used to finance several anticommunist insurgencies and looking at friendly countries that helped finance the rebels, and arms merchants who helped supply them. "I think the Reagan Doctrine is in trouble," says one key administration official.

Many will hail that as a positive development. But there are two problems with going back to the drawing board while the Soviets continue to pursue their objectives with greater skill and sophistication.

The first is that the drawing board is blank. Talk of relying more on economic aid is empty in the age of Gramm-Rudman deficit-reduction goals. Dreams of united Western action seem equally fanciful. The administration, if anything, has relied too much on covert action, which usually hasn't stayed covert, anyway.

The second problem with starting over is that doing so would mean abandoning insurgencies that the U.S. has nurtured or, in the case of the Contras, largely created. "Abandoning the Contras now would produce a catastrophe," says Panamanian Socialist Democratic leader Humberto Lopez-Tirone. "U.S. policy in Central America has become like a road with no exits."

Change could involve domestic political risks as well. "The Democrats don't really like this policy, but they don't have an alternative and they don't want to be held responsible for pulling the plug on the people we've been supporting," says one administration official.

STAT