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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

30 November 1987

Current Soviet Posture on the Persian Gulf

Summary

At the summit meeting in Washington, General Secretary Gorbachev will probably claim that the Gulf is one area where the potential for US-Soviet cooperation is greatest, provided the US acts responsibly. It is unlikely, however, that he will announce any major shift in Soviet positions. Instead, he will probably argue for a US naval drawdown, push Moscow's scheme for a UN fleet, and equivocate on implementing UN Resolution 598. The Soviets are likely to remain unwilling to cooperate with the US in achieving a cease-fire in the Gulf unless the US first substantially reduces its fleet, since joint action without a reduction would be perceived internationally as a US victory. [redacted]

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Moscow is still actively engaging in discussions with Tehran because of a coincidence of interests in wanting the US fleet out of the Gulf, a desire to foster the perception of the USSR as the mediator in the conflict, and the longer term prospect of making gains in Iran. Soviet footdragging on UN Resolution 598 and the appearance of mediation are hurting Moscow's relations with the Arabs, and the Soviets are attempting to limit damage by assuring the Arabs that they are not tilting toward Iran. Reversing the US naval buildup is the primary Soviet goal in the Gulf at the moment, however, and Moscow probably will not revise its fundamental positions on Resolution 598 or the UN fleet in response to Arab concerns. [redacted]

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Footdragging on a UN Sanctions Resolution

To date we have not detected any Soviet intent to propose new ideas on the Gulf war during General Secretary Gorbachev's visit to Washington. Although he probably will come with some new words in support of UN Resolution 598--mainly for propaganda purposes--and claim that the Gulf is one area where the potential for US-Soviet cooperation is considerable, he will try to avoid angering either the Arabs or the Iranians. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Soviet Analysis [redacted] [redacted] in response to a request from Fritz Ermarth, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Regional Policy Division [redacted]

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Despite public protestations that they are fully committed to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 598 in its entirety, the Soviets have remained reluctant to press ahead with sanctions. In late October, Soviet UN Ambassador Belonogov argued that no discussion on sanctions should be undertaken until responses to the UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar's plan for implementing 598 were received. The plan seeks Iraqi and Iranian views on arranging a cease-fire and the establishment of an impartial body to determine blame for starting the war.

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Soviets would not be interested in an enforcement resolution without parallel efforts toward creation of a UN naval force. In his latest meeting in Geneva with Under Secretary Armacost, Vorontsov reiterated Soviet commitment to the implementation of Resolution 598, but would not agree to begin drafting an enforcement resolution.

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Hawking UN Fleet Scheme

It is unlikely that Gorbachev will agree to a major policy shift regarding the Soviet proposal for a UN fleet unless Washington agrees to reduce its fleet in the Gulf. He will be reluctant to appear to be giving in to the US naval presence in the region and probably remains hopeful that Iranian actions and Congressional pressure will eventually force a major reduction in the size of the US fleet there.

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The Soviets are buttressing their proposal for an international fleet under UN sponsorship and calls for the removal of the US naval presence with two arguments. While warning Arab countries of the dire political and military consequences of a continued US naval presence for regional security, the Soviet Union also has pointed to an alleged US ineffectiveness in the face of Iranian defiance.

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[REDACTED]

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The response to Soviet diplomatic efforts promoting the idea of a UN fleet has been lukewarm, if not clearly negative.

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At the UN the Soviet proposal has not attracted interest because of the perception that it is vague and difficult to implement. The Iranians, however, have abstained from publicly condemning or endorsing the Soviet proposal, suggesting their own version of an international fleet that apparently would not include 25X1 representation from either superpower. [REDACTED]

Before the Arab League summit in early November, the Soviets prodded the Arabs to issue a statement favoring a UN fleet. The Arab League Director for International Relations confided to the US Ambassador in Tunis that Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze had sent an urgent message requesting clarification of the Arab position on foreign fleets in the Gulf. The Soviets also tried to get Syria to do their bidding at the summit. Jordanian Foreign Minister Masri told the US Ambassador that the Saudis and Kuwaitis stood strongly against Syrian efforts to mention foreign fleets and propose UN flagging and that eventually Syrian President Assad agreed to withdraw the motion. [REDACTED]

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Moscow the "Honest Broker"

The Soviets have continued their whirlwind diplomacy in the Gulf area, attempting to portray themselves as mediators between the warring sides. Upon his return from visits to Baghdad,

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Kuwait, and Tehran in early November, Vorontsov told Ambassador Matlock in Moscow that Iran had shown more flexibility than Iraq during his discussions in both capitals. Hinting at his effective mediation effort, he added that both sides had moderated their positions somewhat as he talked with each. He insisted that it was important to keep the dialogue going and claimed that Iran was approaching acceptance of Resolution 598. [redacted]

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Perez de Cuellar's report issued after Vorontsov's meeting with Ambassador Matlock in effect belies Vorontsov's assertion regarding the softening of positions by the two parties. It pointedly states that they had now retreated from the acceptance of the Secretary General's initial plan for implementation of 598 and that they differ profoundly on how to begin implementation of the plan, attaching, in fact, new preconditions. [redacted]

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Moscow's attempt to assume the role of a mediator and its continued contacts with Tehran risk greater damage to Soviet standing with the Arabs. We believe that Iranian leaders remain determined to end the war only on their own terms and that, as long as they hold this view, there can be no mediation--Soviet or otherwise. Moscow's attempts to portray Tehran as "flexible" have angered Iraq, Kuwait, and other Arabs and will damage Soviet credibility further the longer Iran continues to be intransigent. [redacted]

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The Soviets appear to have been further sensitized to Arab concerns when in early November the Arab League summit came out with a strong, pro-Iraqi stand and made no reference to the Soviet-sponsored UN fleet. In response to these concerns, Moscow appears to be taking some additional steps to assure Gulf Arabs that it is not siding with Iran and that it supports UN efforts to resolve the conflict. [redacted]

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[Redacted]

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- o Late last week the Soviet military newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda reported that a Soviet destroyer had recently warned off an Iranian frigate after the ship trained its guns on a Soviet tanker the destroyer was escorting. The story gave no indication when the incident occurred, but publication of the event may be a signal to Gulf Arabs that the USSR also has reason to want an end to the hostilities. [Redacted]

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Despite these efforts to mollify the Arabs, the Soviets apparently do not believe Arab anger has reached a point where they have to abandon their expanded contacts with Iran. Such contacts will continue, based, we believe, primarily on the shared objective of reducing the US naval presence in the Gulf. These contacts, moreover, will assist the Soviets in exploiting Tehran's sense of isolation to position themselves, as opportunities arise, to gain influence in Iran. Moscow's more subdued approach than Tehran's to these contacts and the fundamental differences separating the two sides suggest, however, that the Soviets will continue to move cautiously with a view to protecting their broader regional interests. [Redacted]

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Moscow's opportunities might increase substantially if Iran eventually concludes it is running out of options for demonstrating its determination to resist the US presence and

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shows its anger by drawing closer to the USSR. Tehran's incentives would increase if Iran and the US become engaged in serious military clashes. Iran's options would include offering oil and gas agreements on terms favorable to the Soviets, permitting an expansion of the Soviet diplomatic presence, or discreetly lessening Tehran's support for the Afghan resistance. The Soviets, in our view, would pocket such concessions but would be careful not to take any actions that could be interpreted as a dramatic shift in support of Iran in order to avoid appearing to have abandoned the Arabs and to preserve Soviet credibility at the UN Security Council. [redacted]

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