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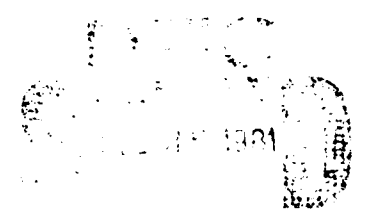
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SOVIET STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Steven J. Rosen

February 1980



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SOVIET STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST,

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Steven J. Rosen

Prepared for an international conference on the Middle East and the West, sponsored by the Center for Advanced International Studies of the University of Miami, February 13-14, 1980.

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Seventeen years ago, following the Cuban missile crisis, Americans celebrated what seemed at the time to be an historic turning point in the Cold War. Without firing a shot, the Kennedy Administration had secured the removal of Soviet strategic nuclear forces from Cuba, demonstrated the commitment of the United States to contain the expansion of Soviet power, and forced Moscow to reconsider the dangers of direct confrontation.

But these achievements, which inspired so much confidence at the time, look quite different in retrospect. We now know that the Cuban crisis, which so many Western observers credited with establishing solid and permanent rules of the game to usher in the era of detente, also sparked the beginning of an accelerated Soviet program of military buildup, the sweeping scope and intensity of which Western publics are only now beginning to appreciate. Since Cuba, diplomats of both camps have professed their devotion to the principles of a stable world order, but while these professions have been matched on the Western side by a general relaxation of military preparations, they have been accompanied on the Soviet side by a campaign of force development of truly unprecedented proportions, a campaign which shows no signs of abatement.

While this dismal state of affairs is a matter of general concern in all parts of the globe, there is a growing awareness that it poses a particularly acute problem in the area of the Middle East. Whereas in Europe, the Warsaw Pact's military advantage could be exploited only at the risk of a world war, and while at the strategic nuclear level calculations of comparative strength are tempered by an awareness of the enormous destruction that would be suffered on both sides, in

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the Middle East the potential freedom of action available to the Soviet Union and its allies to exploit the military advantage is far wider and the risks of escalation in a variety of scenarios may well look more containable. For example, it is estimated that 23 Soviet divisions could be mobilized and moved into Iran in 30 days, consisting of 200 thousand men, compared to only 20,000 American troops, not to mention the formidable political difficulties that would delay or prevent an American response. In the balance of projection forces, the Soviet Union enjoys several distinct advantages: they are much closer to the region (roughly 1000 compared to 7000 miles); their initial forces could arrive earlier; and they have a substantial number of units at a higher level of readiness. Nowhere have these capabilities been more dramatically shown than in Afghanistan, where Moscow introduced nearly 100,000 men in a few weeks, supported by an airlift of breathtaking proportions, without seriously depleting its preparedness in any other theater.

The margin of the Soviet theater advantage will of course be reduced if and when the Administration plans for the 110,000 man Rapid Deployment Force are instituted and access arrangements are completed in Oman, Somalia, and Kenya--though it should be emphasized that a Rapid Deployment Force on this scale will remain for some years a concept rather than an actuality. But even upon the completion of this effort, considerable difficulties will remain. Moscow is not likely to sit on its hands while we struggle to correct past deficiencies, but rather will continue its own buildup, and even without future augmentation the Soviet margin of advantage in the northern tier

will be considerable. Afghanistan almost certainly will be developed as a forward basing area, a full fledged so-called peoples republic, and further south continued expansion is to be expected in Aden and Ethiopia, possibly including a vital major regional port facility for resupplying submarines. Nor can the possibility be excluded of operational bases for Soviet air and naval forces in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, if it should occur that existing political constraints in these countries are altered by decisions or events over which we have no control.

Overall, the U.S. Soviet balance in the Middle East cannot be described as secure, and in the words of President Carter, "it would not be accurate for [the United States] to claim that at this time or in the future we expect to have enough military strength and enough military presence there to defend the region unilaterally." Moreover, beyond the material imbalance of forces there is a political imbalance-- American freedom of action is bounded by domestic political constraints and institutional controls that do not operate in the Soviet Union, and we are more honestly committed to respect the independence and sovereignty of states in the area.

In the face of these disparities, there is an awareness in the United States that defense of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East cannot and should not depend primarily on a capability for U.S. military intervention. With regard to great power allies, the United States has, in theory, on its side, and the Soviet Union has arrayed against it, the most powerful coalition of industrial and populous states ever assembled, now including China in addition to Western

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Europe and Japan. If in fact the vast potential of this coalition could be mobilized, and the domestic and international inhibitions of real defense cooperation in the Middle East could be overcome, the present imbalance in the region could be corrected by joint action in a relatively few years. However, in practice, only limited allied support in such forms as the British presence in Oman and French influence in Djibouti and Tunisia, is to be expected.

If, then, neither U.S. forces nor those of our allies are sufficient to ensure the security of the region, a major responsibility must devolve, as well it should anyway, on the threatened states of the region themselves. This is, of course, particularly true for the class of threats emanating, not from the Soviet Union itself, but from Soviet-supported states like Iraq, Yemen, Ethiopia, Libya, and Syria.

It is worth noting, when we turn from the Soviet Union itself to this motley collection of Soviet allies and proxies, that the USSR has the liability of being associated with some of the potentially weaker regimes of the region. We are often painfully aware of the vulnerability of our friends in the area, but fail to consider the even greater instability of the Soviet alliance system. If, instead of thinking in purely defensive and reactive terms, we were to consider some of the possibilities for a forward strategy to exploit these potential vulnerabilities, some creative ideas to weaken the Soviet position in the area might be available.

For example, the regime in South Yemen, while it enjoys the support of a portion of the politically articulate elite in Aden, gained power only by suppressing the traditional village, tribal, and

religious leadership and by using brute force, advised by East German police experts, to subdue many elements of the traditional society. If there is one regime in the entire area which has put itself at odds with the traditional society, surely it is South Yemen. Should South Yemen attack North Yemen and/or Saudi Arabia, as could happen, and should the South Yemeni army face collapse against a combined Arab force including expeditionary elements from other Arab states, as is also very possible, it is not unlikely that surviving elements of the traditional social structure, as well as dissident tribes in the Hadhramaut, would welcome the fall of the present tyranny. It is also worth bearing in mind that the regime in South Yemen has an army of only 21,000, plus about 2500 advisers, and that such a campaign would be a conventional military operation against organized units rather than a counter-insurgency. Provided that direct Soviet intervention could be deterred, combined Arab forces smaller than those that Egypt sent to the Yemen Arab Republic in the 1960s could achieve a decisive result in a compressed period of time. This is, of course, a highly spectacular scenario, but it illustrates the weakness of the Soviet position if the kind of actions that Moscow directs against others were to be turned around.

Similarly, the Derg in Ethiopia are nearly getting a free ride in their violent suppression of the many tribes of that country, not to mention Eritrea, in terms of the failure of the world to support the victims of the regime. Politically, it is difficult for the West or for other states of the region to support these peoples, beyond deploring the actions taken against them, given the general unwillingness to use Soviet-type tactics of subversion. But if the shoe were

on the other foot, Soviet standard operating procedure would be exploitation of the tribes to subvert the regime, and very possibly such an effort would be successful. But even without additional support to the victims of the Derg, and even without efforts to relieve the problems of Somalia, the Ethiopian regime is highly vulnerable and a rather weak foundation on which to build Soviet power in the Red Sea.

Syria is a third case of a Soviet allied regime faced by potential problems. Majority Sunni dissidence against the Alawite minority regime seems to be gaining momentum, and there is no solution in sight. Recently, there have been incidents of attacks against Soviet advisers in that country. If, as appears likely, the Assad regime's dependence on the Soviet Union continues to grow, it is conceivable that anti-Alawite rebellion will take an increasingly anti-Soviet form.

Iraq is the most important Soviet ally in the region, for reasons of location, its large endowment of oil resources, and its preponderant military capability compared to that of important neighboring states. At the same time, the Iraqi regime is probably the one of the five Soviet allies in the area least vulnerable to domestic or international challenge. In spite of the gross underrepresentation of the Shia majority in the government and the army, and the peculiar Takriti origins of the regime, a real domestic challenge appears to be unlikely, at least in the coming few years. Yet, even here, the Soviet hold is not entirely secure. Iraq's natural trade and cultural connections with the West are a counterweight to the Soviet influence, and its hospitality to a Soviet presence is tempered by a realistic perception

of the potential dangers and by a fierce commitment to independence. It is not inconceivable that there will be an evolution of Iraq toward reduced cooperation with the Soviet Union, even without an Arab-Israeli settlement.

Finally, there is the case of Colonel Qaddafi, who faces no particular challenge at home but whose hostile relations with much of the rest of the Arab world, and whose vulnerability to Egypt if Cairo's patience with this man who Sadat describes as "100 percent sick and possessed by the devil" wears any thinner. Indeed, there are even some observers who argue that we rather than the Soviets protect Colonel Qaddafi and make possible his adventures, by our actions to restrain Egypt.

Overall, then, the centers of Soviet influence in the region cannot be considered secure, and it may not be true that every Soviet advance in the area is in principle irreversible. The possibility of changes to reduce Soviet influence would, of course, be much greater if the United States and its regional allies were to adopt a dynamic forward strategy to exploit these Soviet weaknesses. In the history of the area, the dynamic has prevailed over the static, and this principle can be turned to our advantage. Conversely, a purely defensive orientation may put us on a treadmill, running ever faster to stand still, until we fall exhausted. With the exception of Kuwait, the states of the region not allied with the Soviet Union are, by and large, less vulnerable than the Soviet allies, unless there is direct Soviet military action, and the mere fact that this is good news doesn't mean we should ignore it. Reducing Soviet influence in these

states will not solve all our problems, but the loss of some of the air and naval opportunities in these countries will help to ameliorate the overall threat.

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