

... The Soviets' Changing Strategy

A fundamental shift in Soviet strategy in the Mideast is now taking shape, partly as a result of the brilliant success of U.S. peace-keeping moves in Syria, Egypt and Israel, but partly dictated by deeper and longer-range Soviet interests.

Russians influence in the Mideast of Syria and Egypt is now at its lowest ebb since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. But farther east, along the volatile rim of the Arabian peninsula and the crucial oil-rich Persian Gulf area leading up to Iraq, Soviet influence will soon be on the ascendant. Hence, the compass of the Kremlin's new Middle Eastern policy points to potentially dangerous new problems in the Persian Gulf waterway, so vital to the U.S. as American oil supplies dwindle.

Actually, the Kremlin, as viewed both by Arabists and Kremlinologists here, is not suffering all that much from the humiliating reverses it has had to absorb since the latest Arab-Israeli war of last October. Despite the virtual liquidation of its astronomical investment in Egypt, the result of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's masterful diplomacy, there is real Soviet potential in the gradual settlement of the basic Arab-Israeli dispute.

The clearest gain for Moscow is the soon-to-be-opened Suez Canal, an event that has always been a precondition for the shift of major Soviet activity from the rim of the Mediterranean east to the Persian Gulf.

Once the canal has been cleared and widened, Soviet naval vessels will have easy access to the Red Sea, and around the Arabian peninsula to the Persian Gulf. At one point, Senate hard-liners, led by Democratic Sen. Henry M. Jackson of Washington, seriously considered a carrot-and-stick ap-

proach to Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to block Soviet naval passage through a newly-reopened Suez Canal. The carrot: U.S. development aid; the stick: enforced demilitarization of the canal.

Now, not even Jackson wants to risk offending Egypt, the foremost U.S. ally in the Mideast, by attempting to dictate terms of policing that vital artery. Sadat's stunning success in helping set the stage for Kissinger's miracles of mediation make him far too valuable an ally for such big-power dictation.

Thus, the canal and its use will be under sole control of Egypt, and Egypt has no slight inclination to embargo the passage of Soviet naval vessels.

This means a very great deal to the Soviet Union. It means the canal will become a funnel of military supplies, agents-provocateurs and all the other accoutrements of manufactured revolution to further the new policy objective of Moscow: create a giant pincer movement around the Persian Gulf, its southern anchor probably in Aden, capital of the radical People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and its northern anchor in Iraq.

Working in the primitive political pastures of the Persian Gulf emirates, and even in such sophisticated oil-rich states as Kuwait, Moscow will use its well-tested techniques to create political turbulence throughout the Gulf area in an effort to achieve this end:

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dominant influence over future distribution of the richest crude oil supplies in the world.

The U.S. has assets of its own. Not the least of these is the Shah of Iran, who has dispatched powerful military forces to help the Sultan of Oman in his battle against the radical insurgency called the Dhofar rebellion. But Saudi Arabia and other Arab states along the west coast of the Gulf resent the Iranian incursion. Hence, a key Kissinger objective in checkmating Soviet strategy is to bring the Shah and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia into a serious alignment.

So long as Moscow had Egypt as its main focus in the Mideast, the shift to the Persian Gulf was tangential. Now, however, Kissinger's shrewd mediation of the basic Arab-Israeli struggle has completely removed Egypt as a practical target of Soviet interest. Syria, though less tractable, may also switch away from its always-tempestuous affair with Moscow before Kissinger's Mideast mediation ends.

But the loss to Moscow may be more apparent than real, which may explain why the Russians failed to block the Israeli-Syrian disengagement. Kissinger finally arranged in last week's cliffhanger. The Soviet Union, in short, is ripe for putting its new focus on the Persian Gulf.