
The Mideast

Soviets try to block Weinberger peace bid

by Thierry Lalevée

From the early December visit to Algeria of Soviet Deputy Defense Minister Adm. Sergei Gorskov, to the late December visit of Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonov to Turkey, the Soviet Union has been engaged in an imperial diplomatic drive whose aim is nothing less than the transformation of the Mediterranean Sea, on all sides, into a Russian lake. However, Moscow's hopes that this could be achieved easily were dashed by the impact of two visits, in October and early December, of U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to North Africa and the Middle East. A new American peace initiative in the region could wholly frustrate Moscow's plans in this regard.

The Soviet reaction has been threefold: First, to consolidate already existing military relationships, like that with Syria, which is rumored to be about to receive new MiG-27 fighters, and Libya, with which ties were strengthened by the visit of Libyan Chief of Staff Brigadier Abu Bakr Younes Jabr in early December. Second, to attempt to bring back into the fold those many countries wooed by the Kremlin, but which are now being influenced by the new trends coming out of Washington. Third, to actively prepare the post-Khomeini era and actual occupation of Iran.

Gorskov's visit to Algeria seems to have come under the second category. According to intelligence sources, Moscow began to worry about a growing military relationship between Algiers and Washington following the early October visit of General Burns, U.S. undersecretary of defense for North Africa and the Middle East. While the visit of Burns did open a new chapter in the military cooperation between the two countries, including the potential lifting of congressional prohibitions against the sale of offensive weapons to Algeria, he also apprised the Algerians of the purposes of Weinberger's later visit to Tunis, Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan.

It was enough for Moscow to react as swiftly as possible. Only one year after Marshal Ogarkov visited Algiers, Gorskov arrived.

Little has been made known about the contents of discussions between Gorskov and the Algerian military leadership; and significantly, no new treaty of cooperation or military deals was announced at the end of the visit. Indicative of Soviet worry was that immediately in the footsteps of Gorskov, who left on Dec. 14, Erich Honecker of East

Germany was deployed for several days of talks with the Algerian leadership beginning Dec. 15.

The Soviet military newspaper *Red Star* reported on Gorskov's visit only by praising the ongoing reorganization of the Algerian army, which has seen the creation of the rank of general as well as the position of chief of staff—coverage which may be a warning to the Algerians. Moscow is toying with the idea of using Libya and the separatist Polisario Liberation Front in the former Spanish Sahara, now part of Morocco, to provoke a confrontation between Morocco and Algeria, which has given certain support to the Polisario.

Moscow also decided to upgrade its "cultural" relations with Algeria's neighbor, Tunisia, while numerous new economic cooperation deals were signed by the Soviets and their satellites with Cairo.

A large Soviet delegation visited Kuwait in the middle of December, led by August Voss, chairman of the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet. The delegation was invited to Kuwait on Dec. 18 by the speaker of the Kuwaiti national parliament, Muhammad Yusuf al'Adsani. Later, a meeting was organized with Defense Minister Sheikh Salim al Sabah, who reminded his guests of the warm reception he had received in Moscow when signing a military cooperation treaty last fall.

A joint statement issued by Voss and 'Adsani on Dec. 19 twisted reality to announce that the "United States doesn't want the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan," because it gives the United States "a pretext for an American intervention in the region." That a Kuwaiti leader would sign such a statement reveals much about Kuwait's fears and search for outside protectors to contain the Iranian threat—which, indeed, Moscow has been manipulating at will to obtain just such results.

While so far refraining from directly attacking Khomeini, Moscow has ordered the communist Tudeh Party to shift into open opposition to the mullahs after months of internal faction fights in which the party's leader, Kianouri, advocated a modus vivendi with the regime. The Tudeh has now come out against the five-year long Iran-Iraq conflict, denouncing it as "a reactionary war." It has also joined ranks with the left-wing terrorist Fedayeen-e-Khalq, with which it organized a steelworkers' strike in Esfahan at the beginning of December. In a joint communiqué on Dec. 8, they denounced the mullahs' regime as "oppressive" and Iran's Revolutionary Guards as the "new SAVAK"—the Shah's secret police.

At the same time, the Soviets have begun the construction of major military bases on the Afghan border with Iran. There is little doubt as to their purpose: to facilitate a rapid invasion and occupation of Iran whenever the need and the situation arises. Two airbases with more than 40,000 Soviet Muslim troops standing by have been completed, at Bast-e-amiran near Arak in northwest Afghanistan and at Shindand in southwest Afghanistan. Two more are planned.