

This "Peace Initiative" Merely Postpones War

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Let there be no misunderstanding. Even if Saddam Hussein ultimately goes through with it, the Soviet proposal to end the gulf war will bring neither peace nor stability to the Mideast. At best, it promises a brief interlude, perhaps a decade, during which Hussein will regroup his forces and rebuild his military machine. Then, brandishing nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles, and thirsting for revenge, he will launch Kuwait II, daring America to make his day.

If U.S. blood and treasure are not to have been expended in vain on the sands of Arabia, only one course of action can in good conscience be recommended to President George Bush: Moscow's initiative must fail and Operation Desert Storm must be prosecuted to its necessary conclusion - the fatal weakening of the Iraqi army. No matter how Hussein maneuvers now, Bush must not waver.

The thrust of the Soviet plan is all too apparent. While Iraq's army would be required to depart Kuwait, thereby meeting the minimal demands of Security Council Resolution 660, it would be permitted to take with it all its undestroyed armor and artillery, amounting to almost two-thirds its massive pre-war arsenal. Worse yet, Hussein and his murderous henchmen would be assured continued suzerainty over his death apparatus, immune from any further punishment for their aggression.

This, of course, is all Hussein requires to claim victory, arguing that he had gone toe to toe with the world's greatest power and survived to fight another day. The results for the region would be catastrophic. Hussein's appeal among the Arab masses would skyrocket; America's moderate Arab allies would be discredited and probably overthrown and the threats to Israel would increase dramatically. A surer recipe for future Mideast war is hard to imagine.

For this reason, opposing Moscow's proposal is absolutely necessary. But it will by no means be easy. Already, parts of the fragile international coalition that Bush so skillfully cobbled together are showing signs of strain. Germany continues to amaze. The main accomplice in Hussein's successful efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, whose commitment to the anti-Iraq campaign has always been suspect, Germany has, without shame, rushed to embrace the Soviet plan. Likewise the Italians, eager to re-establish themselves as a major economic partner of Iraq once the war concludes. These parties and other more notorious fence sitters, like the Chinese, have found in the Kremlin's initiative the kind of legal fig leaf they have been seeking -- the kind that has nothing to do with justice and everything to do with selfish interests, providing them with the ideal excuse to back away from the allied war effort and regain the good graces -- and lucrative contracts -- of Iraq.

More problematic for the United States is the pressure the Soviet proposal places on Washington's Arab partners to "give peace a chance." Saudi, Egyptian and Syrian leaders have been adamant, if not sincere, in telling their populations that allied war goals extend only to the liberation of Kuwait, not the systematic dismantling of Iraqi power. If they are forced to rebuff Soviet mediating efforts, their true objectives might finally be revealed, striking a raw nerve in the Arab street, where, rightly or wrongly, the sense of exploitation and humiliation at the hands of western power still runs deep.

Yet this seems to be a risk these Arab leaders are willing to run. They apparently would rather confront the uncertainties stemming from Iraq's decisive defeat by the United States than the certainty of their own demise that would follow any less definitive outcome. Their message to America is clear: Don't stop now.

Perhaps the most troubling, and dangerous, consequence that could flow from Bush's rejection of Moscow's peace plan is in the realm of U.S.-Soviet relations. For two months, ever since the resignation of Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, the superpower relationship has been in a tailspin. The power of the Soviet military has increased dramatically in the Baltics. Now, its muscle is being flexed in the gulf. Moscow's peace initiative reflects the Soviet army's eagerness to save Hussein and the Iraqi army, expand Soviet influence and limit the exercise of American power. It is not inconceivable that U.S. efforts to stiff-arm this program could light the match that reignites the Cold War.

This is not a prospect the administration confronts lightly. The world has an enormous stake in the improved U.S.-Soviet relationship of recent years. And Bush has based his promise of a new world order on the assumption that Washington and Moscow were now working hand in hand as guarantors of international peace and stability.

But of course the new world order would not be lost by America's actions to thwart aggression in the gulf. Rather, it would be sacrificed in the blood of Lithuanian patriots, and by Mikhail Gorbachev's decision to act as the Butcher of Baghdad's advocate against Bush. Increasingly, it appears that the United States cannot achieve both peace in the Persian Gulf and continued detente with the Soviets. Certainly if it accepts Moscow's peace plan it will achieve neither. On this there should be no misunderstanding.

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