Soviet Policy in the Gulf:

A Change for the Worse?

by John Hannah **(/experts/john-hannah)**

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Brief Analysis

Today's report from the BBC that several hundred Soviet military advisors remain in Iraq, actively servicing that country's sophisticated military hardware and command and control system, is, if true, a worrisome development. It would be the latest in a series of recent events that raise the fear that the USSR's retreat from liberalism at home may be mirrored by some backtracking from "new thinking" abroad.

The Soviet government denies that such support is being provided Iraq. It insists that all but a handful of its citizens -- no more than 50, almost all of whom are diplomats or journalists -- have now left Iraq. Inquiries to the Bush Administration seem to substantiate the Soviet case. There exists no evidence to confirm the reports that Soviet personnel are manning Iraqi military systems or providing technical assistance.

U.S. Concerns

If there is less than meets the eye to the issue of the advisors, certain other developments in Soviet policy toward the Gulf crisis are a bit more troubling. In the past few weeks, there have been repeated reports of Soviet efforts to circumvent the international sanctions against Iraq. Most brazen, in this regard, was the Soviet ship intercepted by the U.S. Navy in early January loaded down with military cargo bound for Iraq. Washington has still not received a satisfactory explanation for the incident. Was it ordered by Gorbachev and the central authorities, or was it a rogue operation conducted by pro-Iraqi elements in the military and KGB whose domestic influence is increasing?

On the diplomatic front, the United States also has some concerns. One hour before the allies attacked Iraq, President Bush informed Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev immediately tried to telephone Saddam to urge him to withdraw from Kuwait or face imminent attack. When the Iraqi president could not be reached, Gorbachev ordered his ambassador in Baghdad to contact Saddam in person. Whether he succeeded is unclear. What is clear is that Gorbachev, by design or simply through lack of forethought, could have given Iraq a critical few minutes of advance warning of the attack, potentially resulting in the loss of allied aircraft and pilots.

Now, with war underway, concerns exist that the Soviets will be too eager to broker a diplomatic solution that leaves a great deal of Iraq's military machine untouched and Saddam a hero in the Arab world. In a letter to Saddam just after the war's outbreak, Gorbachev stated that if Iraq indicates its willingness to leave Kuwait, the USSR will intercede with the United States to achieve a cease-fire. While Saddam rejected the offer, there is a fear that Gorbachev will jump at the opportunity to play mediator and save Saddam before the allied forces have achieved

their objectives. Despite these concerns, the Soviets appear to remain part of the anti-Iraq coalition. Just days ago, Gorbachev explicitly emphasized Moscow's insistence that Iraq withdraw completely from Kuwait.

Last week's appointment of Alexander Bessmertnykh to replace Eduard Shevardnadze as foreign minister was also taken as a good sign. Bessmertnykh is considered a Shevardnadze man and a strong proponent of closer U.S.-Soviet relations. He wasted no time in assuring the world that "The policy of new thinking will be preserved," including Soviet support for the allied forces in the Gulf.

The Future of New Thinking: Forward or Back?

The longer-term concern for the United States is how long this will last. While Bessmertnykh's promotion was welcome news, it came in the midst of a long list of worrisome developments, including Shevardnadze's resignation and the ongoing crackdown against pro-independence governments in the Baltic republics. In his attempt to hold together by force the fracturing Soviet empire, Gorbachev has dealt his program of domestic reform a serious, perhaps fatal, blow.

The concern is whether his "new thinking" in foreign policy will also be a casualty. Thus, behind the optimism greeting Bessmertnykh's appointment lies a foreboding that Gorbachev's recent retreat from perestroika at home will eventually lead to its demise abroad. In the short term, as Moscow struggles to reimpose order on the republics, it makes sense to avoid conflict with the West. But inevitably, the crushing of bones in the Baltics will cause a backlash in U.S. policy -- political support for Gorbachev will dissipate, economic aid will be suspended. At that time, it is feared, those right-wing elements in the military, KGB, and communist party that are orchestrating the domestic crackdown will insist on pressing their regressive agenda internationally as well.

In the Middle East, this bodes ill. Many hard-line apparatchiks in the national security establishment built their careers on lucrative client relationships with Arab radicals in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the PLO. They have great interest in maintaining these military and political ties. Conversely they have little interest in actively pursuing the policies that characterized new thinking in the Middle East: disengagement from the radicals, rapprochement with Israel, and support for U.S. efforts to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In his resignation speech, Shevardnadze bitterly complained about the growing power of reactionary forces that had attacked his pro-U.S. tilt in the Gulf. Since August 2, they railed against America's military build-up in Saudi Arabia while advocating a face-saving deal for Saddam. Now, these forces are criticizing America's prosecution of the war, urging Gorbachev to mediate a cease-fire, and warning of the dangers posed to Soviet security by a decisive allied victory that leaves the U.S. military dominant in the Gulf. It is possible that despite the waxing power of the hard-liners, Moscow's moderate Mideast policies will continue. With the internal situation so chaotic, even the conservatives might not have the time, resources, or inclination to cause trouble in the Middle East. While they may seek to slow down the most far-reaching policies, they will not reverse them. At best, in this scenario, "new thinking" will continue and U.S.-Soviet cooperative efforts to promote the peace process and arms control will expand. At worst, Soviet policy will become like that of France -- independent, occasionally annoying, often irrelevant, but rarely inimical to core U.S. interests.

There is, however, a less sanguine view. For all its defects, France remains a pro-Western democracy. The USSR, in contrast, is in a tailspin toward dictatorship, with power increasingly wielded by parties whose sympathies are anything but pro-Western. For the moment, they seem content with reimposing Brezhnevism at home. But, U.S. policymakers must ask, if the conservatives successfully complete that task, will they then try to do the same abroad?

John P. Hannah, a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, was the deputy director of research at The Washington Institute until March 1991. He was the visiting Bronfman Fellow at the Institute of World Economy

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