

The Shevardnadze Resignation: Implications for the Gulf Crisis

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Brief Analysis

Eduard Shevardnadze's dramatic resignation as Soviet foreign minister is bad news for the Gulf crisis: His departure will be welcomed by Saddam Hussein and much-lamented by James Baker.

Shevardnadze's Role

Since the crisis' first days, when he stood shoulder to shoulder with the Secretary of State to condemn Iraq's invasion, Shevardnadze has played a critical role in consolidating U.S.-Soviet cooperation against Saddam. Throughout August, he was in daily contact with Baker, coordinating strategy as if they represented two allies rather than former nuclear rivals. Shevardnadze's statements against Iraq have consistently been the toughest among the Soviet leadership, including President Mikhail Gorbachev, and he has been the only official willing to make the threat -- however empty -- that Soviet forces might help evict Iraq from Kuwait.

In Moscow, Shevardnadze is credited with having single handedly staged a "coup" when he reversed -- literally overnight -- the Soviet Union's 30 year alliance with Iraq. Bureaucrats, from the foreign ministry, military, KGB, and foreign trade offices, who had built their careers on Moscow's ties with Iraq and other radical Arab states -- fought a fierce rear-guard battle against Shevardnadze. While not arguing that the Soviet Union should side with Iraq, they criticized the extent of support given to the United States, arguing against the U.S. military build-up and in favor of a more neutral Soviet position as mediator in the crisis.

Shevardnadze ran roughshod over these views, convinced that Moscow's main priority lay in consolidating its new relationship with Washington, not trying to salvage its old relationship with Iraq. Thus, at virtually every stage of the crisis, when questions arose about Moscow's support for the anti-Iraq coalition, Secretary Baker phoned or met Shevardnadze and persuaded him to reaffirm full Soviet backing for the United States.

The Importance of Superpower Cooperation and Shevardnadze

This cooperation with Moscow has been the linchpin of U.S. strategy to build a world-wide coalition opposing Iraq. Especially when it came to the Security Council resolution authorizing force, Washington correctly calculated that if it could get Soviet approval, virtually all other Council members would feel compelled to go along.

Moscow has been unable to make any material contribution -- either money or troops -- to the anti-Iraq effort. The one thing it has been able to contribute is a powerful image of the world's two superpowers completely united after

40 years of bitter confrontation in their opposition to Iraq. Even with the USSR in decline, the symbolism of this picture had enormous political and psychological impact on the way the rest of the world -- especially the Third World -- viewed the crisis. After all, if the Soviets were supporting the United States, how could anyone else do less? More importantly, the picture of a U.S.-Soviet alliance must have been troubling to Saddam Hussein, who clearly hoped to exploit any difference between the superpowers to hold on to Kuwait.

With Shevardnadze gone, this picture is almost certain to suffer. This is not to suggest that the USSR will reverse its policy in the Gulf. The objective reasons underpinning that policy -- primarily the interest in good relations with the West -- remain, with or without Shevardnadze. But two important things will be lost with his departure. First is Shevardnadze's genuine intellectual commitment to the "new thinking." More than any other Soviet leader, he believed in its principle tenets -- close relations with the United States, the demilitarization and de-ideologization of policy, reducing relations with Third World radicals. For Shevardnadze, these represented strategic rather than tactical shifts, necessary not only because of a collapsing Soviet economy, but because they served the USSR's real national interests. Second, Shevardnadze's exit will mean the breakup of the Baker-Shevardnadze team. While the influence of personal ties should not be overstated in international affairs, in the Gulf crisis, the good working relations and trust between Baker and Shevardnadze were critical on several occasions in orchestrating a coordinated U.S.-Soviet position against Iraq.

After Shevardnadze?

While Washington and Moscow will likely remain on the same side of the Gulf crisis, it may be less shoulder to shoulder and more at arm's length. Whereas Shevardnadze's instincts were always to push the USSR closer to the United States, his successor may be inclined to maintain some distance from Washington and pursue a more "independent" course. This image of a cooling relationship can only give Saddam renewed hope that the anti-Iraq coalition can be undermined and that the weak point might be the Soviets.

These hopes will be strengthened if the rumors that Shevardnadze's replacement is Yevgeny Primakov prove to be true. It was Primakov's two missions to Baghdad in October that created the greatest confusion about Soviet policy in the Gulf crisis. The USSR's leading Arabist with a long-standing relationship with Saddam, Primakov left Iraq on both occasions making spurious claims about positive changes in its position and arguing the need to give Saddam a face-saving way out of Kuwait. Primakov urged Gorbachev to reject a military solution to the crisis and boasted that even if Iraq's position remained unchanged, his trips had succeeded in preventing pro-war forces in Washington from launching an attack. Only after Secretary Baker held extensive talks in Moscow with both Shevardnadze and Gorbachev were Primakov's mixed signals dismissed and the U.S.-Soviet alliance put back on track. Primakov's views are very much seen to represent those of elements in the Soviet bureaucracy that have opposed Shevardnadze's pro-U.S. tilt, not only on the Gulf crisis, but on a range of other issues from Eastern Europe to arms control. These forces -- particularly in the military and KGB -- are precisely the ones Gorbachev is depending on to help him maintain control domestically. With Shevardnadze gone, their influence on foreign policy may also grow significantly.

Shevardnadze's resignation only has down sides for the United States. At the very least, no replacement is likely to have the same commitment to improving U.S.-Soviet relations or the same working relationship with Secretary Baker. In the Gulf, therefore, the best the United States can hope for is a continuation of the basic cooperative policy though at slightly lower levels of coordination and intimacy. Fortunately for the Bush Administration, Shevardnadze is leaving after the Soviets have backed the Security Council resolution authorizing force. At worst, Shevardnadze's departure could presage several developments that have negative consequences for the Gulf crisis, the first being a domestic crackdown in the USSR that will distract U.S. and international attention away from Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. And depending on who replaces Shevardnadze, Soviet policy in the Gulf could move increasingly away from

coordination with the United States toward a more neutral position. In this case, one can expect renewed Soviet efforts to delay a military attack against Iraq and more visits to Baghdad by Primakov to find an escape route for Saddam.

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