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The Gulf War Clock Is Ticking:

U.S. and Soviet Policy

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Brief Analysis

U.S. Policy

The United States will either go to war or will have to begin withdrawing ground forces from the Gulf by next spring. This is the most likely conclusion available from an analysis of the U.S. decision to double ground force deployments in the Persian Gulf. President Bush's decision will permit a U.S. offensive against Iraq once the new forces are in place in early 1991. One key aspect of the American decision unnoticed by commentators, however, is the fact that the United States will either have to go to war early next year or face extremely difficult decisions concerning U.S. ground forces.

The United States will not be able to maintain 400,000 troops in the Persian Gulf region for long without drastic measures. The only obvious solutions are to keep the same soldiers there indefinitely, resuming the draft, calling up extremely large numbers of reserves, and/or retraining and restructuring the remaining American ground forces. Since none of these can be considered likely, it is reasonable to assume that the United States will either go to war in early 1991, or begin to reduce its Gulf deployments shortly thereafter.

By deploying an added 200,000 troops, President Bush has depleted the reserves available to replace units now in Saudi Arabia which might otherwise be rotated out of the region in early 1991. Where can forces come from to replace units now, or soon to be, in the Gulf? There are now scheduled to be six or seven U.S. heavy divisions in the Gulf and there are no replacements in the U.S. active-duty structure for them. It would be hard to deploy some highly capable units there, such as the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea. The Marine Corps face a similar dilemma. After the new deployment, some two-thirds of the active-duty Marine Corps will be in the Persian Gulf region. These cannot be replaced with existing forces. The problems faced by American ground forces are also reflected in the other services. With six carrier battle groups in the Middle East and a seventh at Yokosuka, about half of the active-duty Navy combat units are forward deployed -- a situation impossible to maintain for a lengthy period. The Air Force has also faced some strains, although not to the same degree.

Since American ground units cannot be totally replaced from within active duty American forces, the only way to maintain a forward deployment of this size would involve restructuring/retraining of other U.S. active-duty forces and increasing the size of the Army and Marine Corps. This can only be done by calling extremely large numbers of reserve and Guard units and resuming the draft. Apart from the political controversy that such measures might

cause -- without a declaration of war -- they would also require considerable time. Thus, the current American forces in theater would have to languish in the desert for many additional months, or the United States would have to reduce its ground force deployments. Accordingly, if President Bush has not yet decided to use force against Iraq, he must be nearing such a decision. The United States will have to go to war by next spring or suffer a political setback by withdrawing a substantial portion of its forces from the region.

Soviet Policy

Secretary of State James Baker's talks with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze were largely successful. True, the Soviets were neither eager for a military solution in the Gulf nor prepared to support a UN resolution authorizing force. They did say, however, that war might be necessary; that the Security Council, at the proper time, could act to enforce its decisions; and that Iraq should have no illusions about differences in the U.S. and Soviet approaches to the crisis. This is not a Soviet green light for U.S. military action. But it is a yellow light, one likely to turn green by January, when the United States completes its deployment of offensive forces in the Gulf. The USSR, despite its misgivings about war, will not defect from the U.S.-led anti-Iraq coalition.

These latest statements correct Moscow's public position, which recently seemed to stray from that of Washington. Yevgeny Primakov, Gorbachev's personal emissary, twice visited Baghdad to discuss compromise. Afterward, he spoke vaguely of "positive" changes in Saddam's position. Both Primakov and Gorbachev called for an "Arab solution" to the crisis, a codeword Iraq's supporters use for a settlement leaving Iraq with some reward from its aggression. Gorbachev reportedly asserted a military solution to the crisis was "unacceptable." Concern rose in the United States that the cumulative effect of these statements undermined U.S. efforts to convince Saddam he must retreat completely or be attacked. While Baker's meetings in Moscow helped correct that image, conflicting signals exhibited in Soviet policy are unlikely to vanish entirely. The tensions manifested in Shevardnadze's support for Washington's anti-Iraq position and Primakov's flirtation with appeasement will probably continue, at least until the United States decides that war is inevitable.

How can Moscow's behavior be explained? One theory is that they are trying to play both sides. Cooperating at the UN allows Moscow an improved image in the West; efforts to mediate keep open an option to re-establish a lucrative Soviet-Iraqi relationship. But this interpretation is implausible. Having worked so hard to convince the United States of their commitment to a new relationship, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze would not risk sacrificing it just to maintain ties to a pariah state like Iraq.

More likely, Shevardnadze and Primakov represent conflicting stands in Moscow: the first stresses working with the West and downgrades relations with Third World radicals; the second believes in maintaining Moscow's traditional client relationships while limiting U.S.-Soviet cooperation. Primakov is an Arabist by training with long personal ties to both Saddam and his main apologist, Yasser Arafat. And while Primakov is identified as one of the first "new thinkers" -- his writings in the 1970s and 1980s urged Moscow to pursue a cautious Third World policy to avoid direct confrontation with the United States -- he, in contrast to today's "new thinkers," never seriously criticized Soviet relations with radical states like Iraq, Syria and Libya. Here, Primakov is in line with elements in the Foreign Ministry bureaucracy, the military, and KGB. And his incentive for courting these forces may be great since he is frequently mentioned as an alternative to Shevardnadze as foreign minister.

Perhaps the most plausible explanation is a real tension in Soviet objectives. Moscow is eager to cooperate with the United States in a post-Cold War order but also fears a Gulf war might damage its legitimate interests. Managing these somewhat contradictory goals is the basis for the mixed signals. Thus, they are likely to continue until events force Moscow to make a decision. In the end, as Baker's talks show, Moscow's priority relationship with the United States will probably continue to be the primary factor driving Soviet choices on the crisis.

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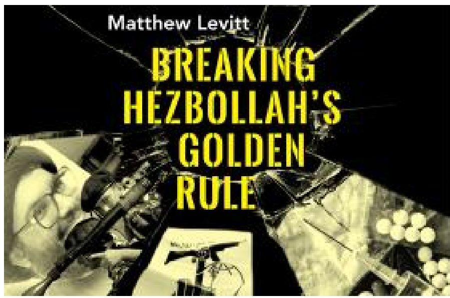

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