

# From Competition to Cooperation: The Helsinki Communique in Perspective

Sep 12, 1990



## Brief Analysis

**D**id President Bush reverse long-standing policy by inviting the USSR to play a role in Middle East peacemaking?

No. In fact, the summit outcome points to two other conclusions. First, the Bush administration has been willing from the outset to give the Soviet Union a role in Middle East peacemaking commensurate with its less threatening and more constructive regional behavior. Second, any enhanced role for Moscow is predicated on its acting in line with U.S. efforts. Thus, when Secretary of State Bush speaks of an eventual international conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict, he means it in the American sense -- as an umbrella for direct negotiations or a rubber stamp to endorse agreements already reached -- not in the Soviet sense -- as a meeting to impose an agreement on Israel.

This policy on the long-standing Soviet demand for an international conference stems from Secretary of State Shultz's formula that the U.S. would agree to a "properly structured" conference "at the appropriate time." In the past 18 months, Baker adhered to this formula while doing everything possible to persuade the Soviet Union and European allies that now was not the appropriate time to convene a conference.

Instead, he argued successfully that they should support his efforts to turn the April 1988 Shamir Initiative into an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue in Cairo. He was not averse to mentioning the international conference when he sought to pressure the Shamir government, which continues to oppose the idea. But as Foreign Minister Shevardnadze noted yesterday, and a senior official travelling with Baker confirmed, "Secretary Baker is not very enthusiastic about it."

President Bush was more open to the idea itself, and no more reluctant than Baker to use it as a threat to gain leverage. Last June the White House openly discussed "going back to the drawing boards" if the new Shamir government did not accept the Baker Plan. But it quickly recognized that pursuing an international conference was only likely to bog the administration down in another two years of protracted negotiations about modalities rather than substance.

Working with the Soviet Union on Middle East issues, however, was a different matter. When Baker first met Shevardnadze in Moscow in 1989, he proposed joint efforts to resolve regional conflicts. Gorbachev's priorities at the time were bilateral relations and Europe, but a channel was established for Middle East peace process discussions at the Ross-Terasov level (Dennis Ross, the Department of State's Director of Policy Planning, is in charge of the peace process and Soviet regional talks; Genadi Terasov is the Kremlin's special Middle East envoy).

These regular discussions succeeded in persuading the Soviet Union to put support for the Baker Plan ahead of its demand for an international conference. Soviet pressure on the PLO switched from urging it to reject the Cairo talks to encouraging it to acquiesce in them. Moscow also altered its precondition for diplomatic relations with Israel from acceptance of an international conference to mere agreement to enter negotiations. Gorbachev also told Syrian President Hafez al-Assad to settle with Israel and rejected his quest for "strategic parity." And Moscow opened its

gates to a vast exodus of Soviet Jews to Israel.

Where the Soviet Union had previously sought to undermine and oppose American peace efforts, it now adopted a constructive, cooperative approach. In the broader context of the end of Cold War rivalry and Soviet empire's collapse, the decline in Moscow's willingness to make mischief was matched by a reduced ability to wield influence. Excluding the Soviet Union from the Middle East was no longer worth making a priority nor even an issue.

By February 1990, as Baker prepared for the Cairo talks, the State Department assumed that Moscow would renew diplomatic relations with Israel, clearing the way for its attendance as an observer. Publicly, this was underscored by a Baker-Shevardnadze joint communique that emphasized superpower support for the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.

The failure to get the Cairo talks under way did not end joint efforts. Just before Iraq invaded Kuwait, the superpowers began discussing an effort to promote Middle East arms control talks under Soviet-American auspices. This fit with a broader administration strategy to shift the focus of superpower discussions away from bilateral and European issues -- that were now being resolved -- to joint efforts to deal with regional conflicts.

In this context, the Helsinki communique's commitment to cooperative efforts to resolve all remaining Middle East conflicts was not a reversal but rather a reaffirmation of policy. Indeed, it was precisely those earlier cooperative efforts that made possible the joint superpower communique at the outset of the Gulf crisis that condemned Iraq's invasion. And this U.S.-Soviet accord, in turn, provided the basis for the President's entire multilateral effort.

What is notable about the Helsinki joint communique is precisely the opposite of what some analysts claim: it makes no reference to the Soviet demand for an international conference and specifically de-links a resolution of the Gulf crisis from a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Bush appears to have succeeded, as Baker did before him, in bringing the Soviet Union around to supporting America's diplomatic priorities and process. If Gorbachev adheres to this supportive role through the Gulf crisis, we should expect joint superpower efforts to resolve regional conflicts in its aftermath. But not through a Soviet-style international conference. Instead, the main priority is likely to be on joint arms control efforts, Gulf security arrangements, and Soviet support for a renewal of the American-led Arab-Israeli negotiating process.

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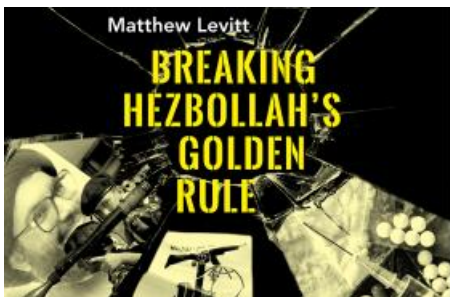
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