

Toward the Helsinki Summit: Where Does Moscow Stand?

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Brief Analysis

Sunday's Helsinki summit between Presidents Bush and Gorbachev offers an opportunity to consolidate impressive U.S.-Soviet coordination that has arisen in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, as well as to avoid future misunderstandings on the crisis that Iraq might seek to exploit. Such coordination is a key pillar in Washington's strategy to impose a world-wide political, economic and military quarantine on Saddam Hussein that will force him to reverse his aggression.

Despite certain tactical differences in U.S. and Soviet approaches, the Bush Administration has consistently praised Moscow for its constructive role in supporting the U.S.-led effort to counter Iraq. Specifically, U.S. officials point to Gorbachev's continued condemnation of Iraq's invasion, the embargo of Soviet arms to Iraq, and Soviet support for all five UN Security Council resolutions, including one endorsing the use of military force to implement economic sanctions.

Politically, Soviet opposition to Iraq was a key factor in U.S. efforts to mobilize the international community -- especially the Third World and Arab world -- in opposition to the invasion. Countries that in the past might have wavered for fear of being branded lackeys of U.S. "imperialism" could now act in concert with both superpowers. Similarly, radical anti-Western states that might have been tempted to support Iraq in order to oppose U.S. "imperialism" were denied such a pretext.

Militarily, Moscow's stance on the crisis has provided the U.S. with unprecedented levels of flexibility. Without the Cold War's imperative of confronting the Red Army globally, the U.S. is freer to focus its military energies and assets on effectively countering Iraqi aggression.

Soviet support for the international consensus against Iraq is driven by several considerations. First is the hard-nosed judgment by Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze that long-term Soviet interests lie in cooperation with the West. They believe that the USSR will be unable to resolve its tremendous internal difficulties without Western help, especially full Soviet integration into the global economy -- the entrance price includes supporting the West in this crisis.

Second, the Soviet position is consistent with Gorbachev's "new thinking" in foreign policy. Beyond the purely instrumental concerns for winning Western assistance, Gorbachev and Shevardnadze seem genuinely to believe that Iraq has violated international norms, thereby threatening the stability of the entire post-Cold War global order.

Third, by all accounts there seems to be overwhelming public support in the Soviet Union for joining the world community in opposing Iraq's invasion. As political pluralism has grown in the Soviet Union, public opinion has become an increasingly important factor in policy debates. Most Soviets view their government's past support for Iraq as epitomizing the dangerous, costly and immoral policies of the Brezhnev years.

While the Bush Administration has been happy with the overall level of Soviet support, there is concern that certain Soviet positions might send Saddam Hussein the wrong signal, encouraging him to believe that he can successfully stall for time and undermine the international consensus so as to hold on to the spoils of his invasion. Specifically, U.S. officials point to the continued presence of Soviet military specialists in Iraq, expressions of criticism by some Soviet officials of the large U.S. military deployment, and Soviet suggestions that some kind of diplomatic settlement can be found that falls short of fully implementing UN resolutions and achieving declared U.S. objectives.

Soviet ambivalence regarding a U.S.-led military solution to the crisis can be traced to several factors:

- The general concern -- partly a holdover from the Cold War -- about a large, new U.S. military presence in a region close to Soviet borders. This concern is being emphasized in the Moscow policy debate by leaders of the Soviet military and foreign policy bureaucracy whose budgets, positions, and views have all depended on the Cold War rivalry. Those Soviet statements criticizing the U.S. deployment, as well as those Soviet actions smacking of "old thinking/" i.e., maintaining military specialists in Iraq and Shevardnadze's renewed call for an international conference to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict -- have been attributed to the continued influence of these hard-liners.
- The Soviets are nervous that a military conflagration in the Gulf might have disastrous consequences, resulting in further destabilization of the Middle East, possibly extending to the USSR's already restless Muslim population in Soviet Central Asia.
- The Soviets are concerned that -- with or without the Cold War -- such a massive, unilateral display of U.S. military power will embarrass the USSR internationally, further underlining its decline as a major global power. With serious internal problems and the isolationist mood of a post-Afghanistan public, Moscow has neither the stomach nor the ability to act as a major military power in the Gulf.
- The Soviets are worried that U.S. military action that they do not control but appear to accept might threaten their other important relationships, especially in the Arab world.
- Gorbachev's genuine belief in the necessity of resolving international conflicts peacefully moves him to urge that all political avenues for a settlement must be exhausted before military action is contemplated. The superpowers will use the Helsinki summit to discuss and narrow their differences, making sure they do not become a tool which Saddam Hussein can manipulate to achieve his objectives. Iraqi Foreign Minister Aziz's trip to Moscow on the eve of the summit represents precisely such an attempt to split the superpowers.
- At Helsinki, President Gorbachev will seek assurances from President Bush that Soviet concerns about the military option are being taken into account and that U.S. forces pose no threat to the Soviet Union. President Bush will look to Gorbachev for assurances that the USSR remains fully supportive of the international consensus against Iraq, and that the ambiguities in Soviet behavior, especially the continued presence of military specialists, will be resolved. A joint statement by the two presidents that again underscores their commitment to the full implementation of UN resolutions will send a strong signal to Hussein that he has no chance of playing the superpowers off against each other. Even better would be a declaration committing the superpowers to working for the development of what Secretary of State Baker has called a "new regional security structure" to neutralize regional aggressors like Iraq, including more effective international regimes that prevent such states from developing and acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

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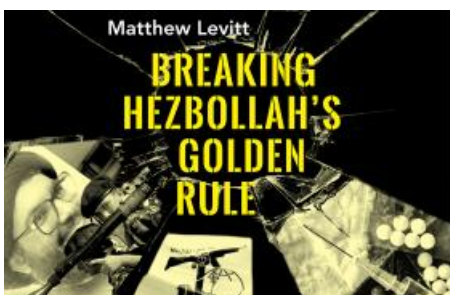
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