

A SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS: U.S.A.-U.S.S.R.

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PANEL 3

OPEN ADVENTURISM

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KURTIS:

Daniel Pipes is a specialist in Middle Eastern and Islamic affairs, director of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and editor of Orbis. We welcome him home after six years of studying abroad, three years in Egypt, because he taught here at the University of Chicago, as well as at Harvard and the U.S. Naval War College. He also served in the Department of State, on the Policy Planning Staff, and in the office of the Counselor. He has worked on the CBS morning news. That makes three of us. Three out of four, I guess. It hasn't hurt us a bit, has it? Daniel.

DANIEL PIPES:

Thank you, Bill. I'd like to look at one of the regions that we've been covering in the context of the Third World, namely, the Middle East. The topic of the Middle East is usually the odd one out when we Americans look at the world and at the U.S.-Soviet relationship. In most regions of the world --Central America or South Africa or East Asia--we tend to look at the region itself in terms of East-West politics. Many decry that and say that it means we ignore other issues, perhaps more pressing ones having to do with poverty and overpopulation, regional conflict, local tyranny, suppression of human rights, and the like. I submit to you, however, that in the larger framework of American interests abroad, it is

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sensible in any given region to keep our eye primarily on the question of the Soviet Union and our relations with the Soviet Union. We see European politics largely in terms of our relations with the Soviet. We see politics the same in most other regions.

The Middle East is the odd region out where, instead of looking at the normal bilateral relationship, and the region in terms of that bilateral relationship, we look at the region in its own terms. After studying this for some time, my conclusion is that our policies are in general less effective and less direct because we are not keeping our eye on the ball. We're not keeping our attention focused on the single most important aspect of U.S. foreign policy. We are tending to look at the local issues and in particular financial issues to the detriment of our larger interests.

That said, I'd like to consider two aspects of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the Middle East. First I'll look at some principal activities of the Soviet Union in the area, and second, I'll draw some conclusions from that.

The pattern of Soviet activities in the Middle East is a rather striking one. It was the first region where the Soviets after World War II became fully engaged in diplomacy, arms transfers, military training, and the like. It began in 1955 with the sale of arms by Czechoslovakia to Egypt. Then the Soviets funded the Aswan Dam and many other more ambitious large-scale projects that fitted into a plan more determined than you would find anywhere else. The Soviet presence in the Middle East increased and increased from the mid-1950s until the early 1970s. It was a period of great optimism on their part. They had major allies in the region. Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser was friendly to them, the Algerians after the 1962 revolution, the Iraqi government, the Syrian government, the Yemeni government, the South Yemeni government after it achieved independence in 1969, and so on. Many countries were

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friendly to the Soviet Union and there was a sense that things were going the way of the Soviet Union, that the United States was slowly being eased out of the region. The American allies were feeling pressed and they were growing fewer in number.

Then beginning in 1973 the situation changed. The 1973 war between the Arabs and Israel, which was simultaneous with the oil price increase, led to a series of American diplomatic efforts that were unusually successful. Indeed, one can say that at no time in the history of American diplomacy have we achieved the kind of successes that we had in the Middle East between 1973 and 1979-1980. There was a disengagement treaty between Egypt and Israel. There was a disengagement treaty with Syria and Egypt. There was the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. There were a variety of other agreements. There was even an agreement between Lebanon and Israel in 1983 that was later abrogated. These all indicated that the momentum was on the American side and the Soviet position was eroding. The Egyptians abandoned the Soviets in 1972. The Iraqis began to move away. The Algerians became more neutralist. The Soviet position weakened. On the other hand, the American allies strengthened. Turkey became a more powerful country again. And, in particular, Israel, the foremost American ally in the region, once again was a power to be counted on, more so than previously.

What did the Soviets do? They responded by trying to hold onto what they have. And the pattern today--this is my main point--is that the Soviets are holding on. They are in a weak position vis-à-vis us and they are essentially holding onto what they have.

The one major exception to that, of course, is Afghanistan, if you include that in the Middle East. The Soviets moved into the country at the very end of 1979, almost seven years ago, and have been engaged in a bitter and protracted war since that time. While the effort has been determined on both sides,

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and the Afghan Freedom Fighters have been valiant in their use of meager resources and their determination to retain their own way of life, it is generally conceded that if the Soviets maintain the same effort that they now employ, Afghanistan will eventually be absorbed in some fashion into the Soviet orbit. The Soviets are looking to the long term. They are bringing Afghan youths to the Soviet Union by the tens of thousands. They are building infrastructure, such as roads and communications, which make it more possible for them over the long term to hold substantial portions of the country. They are eradicating the agricultural base of the Afghan peasants so they are forced to flee to Pakistan. They're destroying the culture of the Afghans so that the people who are left are somewhat deracinated. They are in some cases taking control of cities and provinces so that there is no local political structure. I think it's safe to say that by virtue of this combination of efforts--military, infrastructural, cultural, and political; by virtue of their taking Afghans to the Soviet Union and building roads--the Soviets, if they maintain their efforts, cannot be pushed out and Afghanistan is fated to be part of the Soviet bloc. The exact terms have yet to be determined but it seems almost impossible that the Soviets would let go of it. If they were to let go, it would be due to some still more pressing crisis in some other region. This is the major effort of the Soviets in the Middle East.

The other major effort has to do with the Republic of Syria. The Syrian government was the one that did not betray their Soviet patrons. The Syrians have remained close to the Russians. The Syrians have become the pivot of Soviet activities in the region. Indeed Syria has become virtually a member of the Soviet bloc. It doesn't have a communist regime. It doesn't have all the same rituals of state. But it is, if you look at it closely, a de facto member of the Soviet bloc.

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And here is where our tendency not to look at the Middle East in East-West terms leads to problems.

I think if we did look at the Middle East in those terms, it would become readily apparent that Syria is as close to the Soviet Union (with obvious exceptions in detail) as, say Cuba is, or Vietnam. Its trade is largely with the Soviet bloc. Its political ties are with the Soviet bloc. Its military connections are deep and extensive, ranging far beyond the transfer of arms and including, for example, real time access for Moscow to the air control radar in Syria. Russian generals in Moscow can tell exactly what's happening in the air over Damascus at the time it's happening. They can also send that information on to Soviet ships in the Mediterranean. This is an extremely ambitious and difficult kind of network to establish, very costly, quite fragile, and indicative of faith and mutual need that goes beyond what most people recognize.

The Syrian regime is close to the Soviets in other ways as well. Its domestic policies are increasingly moving in the direction of the Soviet domestic policies, in, say, control of the press, the treatment given to dissidents, the way minorities are handled, the way the economy is increasingly taken over by the state and taken out of private hands. In a variety of small ways, you see a Sovietization of Syrian domestic life.

The Syrians are valuable to the Soviets not just in military ways. They are the foremost base for terrorist activities not just in Syria but also in Syrian-controlled portions of Lebanon. Syria and its area of Lebanon are, I believe, the single most important patron of state-sponsored terrorism in the world. They are closely aligned to the Libyans and to the Iranians. Between those three agents, you will find a hand in almost every terrorist act in the Middle East and many of those in Europe and a number in such faraway places as Sri Lanka or the Philippines. It is the single most

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important center. We tend to look more at the P.L.O. and at Libya for terrorism, but I think the days of the P.L.O. and of Libya are over. They still kill a few people. They still make the effort. But these are almost random acts that have no real political content, no real significance. What the Syrians are doing (and the Iranians as well) has true meaning and true importance and affects our policies, as we've seen in recent weeks.

To move on to another country, the Libyans present problems to the Syrians. Qaddafi is a loose cannon. He has also been a rich one who could afford the weapons that he acquired. He didn't have to borrow money for them, or get Soviet concessions for them. So he remained a freer actor than, say Assad or other clients of the Soviet Union in the Middle East. He's an unpredictable one. At one point, for example, he was sending arms to the Afghan rebels. He's a difficult man for them to work with. But he does provide certain undeniable advantages to the Soviet Union. The position of Libya is extremely critical. It is close to the Middle East, close to Africa, close to the Mediterranean, and close to Southern Europe.

The massive arsenal that the Libyans have built up is a source of potential strength to the Soviets. Military analysts generally concur that the Libyan forces themselves could never use the arms they have and that essentially these are forward basing for possible Soviet use at times of crisis.

Other Soviet friends in the region are South Yemen and Ethiopia, small countries, poor countries, countries with internal rebellions and a variety of local problems, but nonetheless strategically placed at the entrance of the Red Sea and potentially useful in combination with Syria and Libya, potentially useful in times of crisis concerning oil. They are good friends to have, good sleepers to have. They might be useful some day.

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And finally there are the Persian Gulf states which are perhaps the most frustrating to the Soviet Union. The Middle East is now in the throes of a dramatic, perhaps unprecedented economic decline. The oil revenues that shot up so speedily in the early 1970s, so that Saudi Arabia took in \$12 billion in 1971 and \$108 billion in 1981, almost ten times as much--those revenues are not exactly going back to \$10 or \$12 billion, but they are now at about \$30, \$35 billion. The contraction of the oil economies is a great temptation to the Soviets but one which they so far have been unable to do much about. They have been trying to build a dramatic presence in the region, to build up trade. But they have to face the fact they have almost nothing to offer these countries which still have the money to buy the best weapons and have connections to obtain the best. So the Soviets are not getting very far there.

Now, I would like to draw some conclusions about the Soviet presence in the Middle East. First of all, it's clear that the Middle East is very important to the Soviets. It is the only major region on the borders of the Soviet Union that's not heavily armed. You have N.A.T.O. on one side and China on the other and the Middle East is in between. Iran and Afghanistan are weak countries, and if the Soviets are interested in some kind of expansionary movement, the Middle East is the place to do it. Conversely, if they're afraid of trouble, the trouble will come from the instability on their southern border, not their eastern or western borders. The Middle East is important because of oil and the simple fact remains, even during the oil glut, that if the Soviets could take control of the Persian Gulf, they would control the Western economies. No other region of the Third World would give them such power as the Persian Gulf.

Finally, the Middle East is critical for transportation. Transportation across the Soviet Union east-west from the Pacific to Western Russia is still weak. There's not much more

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than a single railroad in most places. The Soviet Union needs other ways of reaching its Pacific coast and that means going through the Middle East. The Middle East also remains critical for Soviet domestic purposes, much as the Panama Canal is important to us. We've got to use the Panama Canal. It's not American, but it's near us and we need it for communications.

The importance of the Middle East lies in the whole variety of political and diplomatic efforts there. It also lies in the extent of the arms sales, the military training, military credits, military transfers, economic credits, economic technicians in the region. More than half the Third World aid and supplies provided by the Soviet Union are within the Middle East.

Second, my conclusion is that the Soviet Union is on the defensive these days, as it is in many other regions. Its culture and ideology, as Mr. Simes has pointed out, are not attractive. It has no answer to the abiding problem of fundamentalists as long as it has little help to offer in a time of economic difficulties. It responds, and this is my final point, by building its relations with key allies--Syria, Libya, South Yemen, and Ethiopia. It seeks to upset the region with state-sponsored terrorist groups, Syria and Libya being the key actors. And it keeps conflicts going. Here I point to the Arab-Israeli conflict where the Soviet influence tends to be directed toward keeping the conflict growing. If it ended, then once again they'd be in a situation where what they have to offer--arms and military help and the like--would become less valuable. You have to keep remembering that what the Soviets have to offer is military. Turmoil, if not actual war, is conducive to their influence.

In ending, I note that, as in other regions, these are not easy times for the Soviet Union in the Middle East, and what they're doing is keeping a hand in and keeping their allies in place until better times roll again. [Applause]