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The Changing Strategic Balance and Soviet Third World Risk-Taking

Alvin Z. Rubinstein

What is the relationship between the changing strategic balance and Soviet risk-taking in the Third World? Is Soviet risk-taking in the Third World likely to increase? If so, under what conditions and for what reasons?

As we look ahead, the questions of Soviet perceptions, Soviet behavior, and Soviet intentions—and of the interrelationships among them—loom large. Crucial to any analysis, whether interpretation of past actions or speculation about future ones, is the accuracy of the assumptions on which it rests. There is a need continually to ensure that they rest on perceptions of reality that are as undistorted as possible, on data which shed light on the questions they are intended to illumine, on projections and comparisons and analogies, and on evaluations which avoid reading into what is seen or discovered that which is preferred and expected.

There is clearly no Rosetta stone for deciphering the past or anticipating the future. Since reality is infinitely more complex than the theories that seek to explain it, any explanation is vulnerable to criticism. Nonetheless, if we are to speculate about the future, we need to assess the past, making as explicit as possible our assumptions concerning Soviet policy and motivations, and the circumstances that occasioned them, and indicating how this record of Soviet performance in the Third World is apt to presage possible future behavior.

Since the Soviet Union became an integral factor in the politics of the Third World, it has undertaken a varied and extensive range of activities that permits some generalizations about the characteristics of its policy. Its gradual shift from a continental-based strategy to a global strategy entailed a readiness to increase economic and military assistance, protect clients from defeat, and accept possible confrontations with the United States. A review of Soviet behavior over the past generation suggests a kind of operational code guiding Moscow's policy in the Third World. There are, inevitably, exceptions to some of these propositions, as will be noted. Nonetheless, the

effort to distill a set of operational principles may help to clarify basic assumptions about Soviet aims and thus contribute to speculation about future Soviet policy.

First, the Soviet Union has pursued a differentiated policy that reflects a keen appreciation of local and regional realities, and a sharp eye for opportunity. Whether exploiting the polarization in the Middle East and South Asia wrought by the US policy of containment in the 1950s, normalizing relations with countries aligned militarily with the United States, or encouraging militancy and efforts to weaken pro-Western regimes, it has proceeded pragmatically, on a case-by-case basis, and adapted to the preferences of regional clients. In seeking to maintain close government-to-government relations, Moscow consistently used whatever instruments of diplomacy were appropriate to a given situation. To increase the range and effectiveness of its imperial outreach, in the 1970s it learned to use surrogates (especially, Cuba and East Germany).

Second, strategic and military considerations, not ideology or economics, impelled Soviet policy. By courting Third World countries opposed to Western-sponsored alliances and intent on undermining their Western-oriented regional rivals, the USSR sought to fashion a regional environment conducive to the promotion of its geopolitical and military aims, especially in the context of the perceived rivalry with the United States. If tangible military benefits resulted from a particular courtship or commitment, so much the better, but at no time were they prerequisites for the largesse that Moscow offered. The main objective was always to enable a client to pursue policies that Moscow deemed advantageous to improvement of the strategic context within which Soviet diplomacy proceeded rather than to acquire specific influence over the client. Put in another way, the aim is to weaken the United States, the Soviet Union's principal adversary. It is this underlying rationale that accounts for the USSR's adapting to the shah's conservatism, Sadat's de-Nasserization, Qaddafi's endemic anti-Americanism, Khomeini's fundamentalism, and Assad's ambitions in Lebanon. All of this adds up to a quintessentially imperial policy.

Third, with the exception of Soviet policy in Afghanistan after 26 December 1979, the level and character of Soviet involvement was determined by the Third World country. Soviet assistance, advisers, and involvement on behalf of a Third World country came as a result of invitation, not imposition. As a rule, Moscow acceded fairly quickly to requests from would-be clients, especially when it sought to establish an initial presence and when the client was in a situation of "clear and present danger." Considerations of cost do not seem to have been a serious constraint on Soviet support.

Fourth, the Soviet Union has raised arms-giving to a political art. To strengthen a client and its ability to resist or undermine a pro-Western

regional rival—without giving the impression or the wherewithal that would lead the client to believe it had a “green light” to start a war and expect full Soviet support—is to tread a fine line, but Moscow has done precisely that in a number of explosive situations, most recently, in the support that it provided Syria after Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. Soviet arms transfers and use of military power are continually, and skillfully, adjusted to the political and military needs of the client. None of the supposedly inherent dilemmas facing the Kremlin are weighty enough to change Soviet policy in any fundamental way because Moscow realizes that only through arms can it secure its political position.

Once the arms had paved the way for the establishment of a political relationship, their continued flow and level of sophistication depended on different considerations, in accordance with Moscow’s differentiated approach and aims: the importance of the political connection, e.g., India and Cuba; the client’s military situation, e.g., Egypt, between 1967 and 1973, and Syria, since 1973; the privileges extended the Soviet Union, e.g., Somalia, until 1977, and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen); and the ability to pay, e.g., Libya and Iraq.

Fifth, in the main, Moscow has been skillful in stimulating but not inciting a client’s ambitions—a subtle but significant distinction. Except in the notable cases of Angola and Afghanistan, it counseled clients to temper their eagerness for quick advantage from Soviet arms with awareness of the consequences of escalation. Thus, there is no evidence that Soviet suppliers ever goaded regional recipients into untenable courses of action in order, for example, to intensify their dependency. Moscow’s way was to provide arms and support enabling the client to follow its preferred course that suited general Soviet purposes.

Sixth, the Soviet Union has demonstrated an increasing readiness to commit its own combat forces on behalf of clients, though in ways that do not directly or immediately threaten the survival of US-backed regimes. When committing its forces (or those of proxies), Moscow has kept the military purposes limited and specific, primarily to preserve the regional balance of power and not create a new one—notable exceptions were Angola and Afghanistan. This readiness to project power stems from an impressive and continually improving conventional capability. The growing disparity between the USSR’s conventional force capability and that of the United States makes for greater Soviet risk-taking, as indeed does the availability of suitable proxies, consideration of which goes beyond the scope of this paper but needs to be calculated in any assessment of Soviet risk-taking.

Seventh, Moscow has been patient, equanimous, and adaptive in the face of setbacks. It learned to accept periodic “failure” as a hazard of seeking influence in the Third World; to recognize the limits of its influence; and to treat constraints and disappointments as concomitants of new options and

advantages. The period of the establishment of a presence and the accumulation of easy benefits having passed, Moscow appreciates that future gains will be costly and uncertain. Privileged access to military facilities (e.g., Cuba, South Yemen, Egypt from 1967 to 1976, and Somalia from 1974 to 1977) has been the exception rather than the norm, and political alignment to the Soviet bloc has more often than not been superficial, notwithstanding the large number of friendship treaties. And the more Moscow becomes involved, the more it tries to obtain for its commitments, the more it invariably arouses nationalist resentment and opposition. None of this is unknown to the Kremlin. Yet judging by Soviet behavior, there is no wavering in the forward policy adopted in the mid-1950s.

Eighth, the Soviet Union has proved a reliable, effective patron-protector, openly supportive of clients who request assistance against external attack, against internal opposition, and against pressure from a US-backed regional rival. Once involved, Moscow has shown a readiness to stay the course, irrespective of the military and economic costs or the adverse effect on its relationship with the United States. The net effect has been to enhance the USSR's credibility as a superpower guarantor.

Ninth, though rendering military assistance and fueling regional arms races, Moscow has done so with due regard for regional balances. It has tried to avoid or severely limit local wars. Realizing that its principal attraction for many clients derives from its ability to supply weapons and protect them from defeat, the USSR has been generous with arms, but has by no means acceded to all requests for aid. Arming anti-Western Third World regimes has been Moscow's tried-and-true method of securing a political role for itself and of thwarting US aims. Initially, this policy was designed to exploit regional conflicts, for example, between Iraq and Iran, Iraq and Kuwait, South Yemen and Oman, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, India and Pakistan, and Somalia and Ethiopia, by developing a close arms relationship with one party to the dispute; but, once having forged a connection, it generally prefers to dampen regional conflicts and, as in the Iraqi-Iranian and Somali-Ethiopian cases, to improve relations with both parties and help mediate their disputes. The notable exception since 1967 has been the Arab-Israeli sector of the Middle East.

Finally, to Washington's continual surprise, Moscow has repeatedly demonstrated that it will not curb its relentless quest for strategic and political advantages in the Third World in order to improve relations with the United States. The Kremlin does not accept the notion, fashionable in US foreign policy circles, that linkage is applicable to superpower rivalry in the Third World. On no Third World major issue since 1967 has it deferred to American preferences or drawn back from regional face-offs. Increasingly, Moscow, through manipulation of Soviet weapons and myrmidons, determines the course and outcome of regional conflicts. It is still, of course,

keenly interested in détente with the United States, especially as it relates to SALT, trade, technological transfers, and credits, but refuses to see any long-lived contradiction between this set of aims and the on-going super-power rivalry in the Third World. For Soviet leaders the big unknown in the future is not what Moscow will do, but what Washington is apt to do.

The Soviet Union's growing ability to project power could lead to a propensity for higher risk-taking in areas and situations of opportunity in the Third World. Quite evident in the characteristics of Soviet-Third World diplomacy noted above is the shift from inhibiting and undermining Western options and positions to the forceful promotion and advancement of its own interests and concrete objectives. The phenomenon is easier to identify (Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Cuba) than to date. Initial tentativeness has given way to open assertiveness. Leonid Brezhnev told the 26th Congress of the CPSU on 23 February 1981: "No one should have any doubts, comrades, that the CPSU will consistently continue the policy of promoting cooperation between the USSR and the newly free countries, and consolidating the alliance of world socialism and national liberation movements."

In speculating on the possibility of greater Soviet risk-taking in the Third World, it is necessary to clarify terms and assumptions, and to distinguish between risk-taking and less threatening, albeit challenging, forms of Soviet activity.

First, intervention is different from involvement, which is a normal process whereby government A becomes engaged in a variety of economic, military, political, and cultural activities sanctioned by government B. Involvement is overt, on-going, noncrisis oriented, and generally geared to some long-term objective. It is directed inward, aimed at strengthening B's internal system.

Second, involvement transmutes into intervention when there is a direct and intrusive projection of military power by the patron on behalf of the client in order to bring about a preferred political outcome, in an atmosphere of tension, with unmistakable external ramifications. Thus, in contradistinction to arms transfers—i.e., the providing of military equipment and advisory personnel, which is a form of involvement—intervention enrolls the commitment of combat or combat-support personnel to produce a favorable resolution to a crisis situation. It also differs markedly from subversion in that it is overt and managed on behalf of the ruling authorities.

Third, an intervention may be regarded as low risk, if one or more of the following circumstances prevail: the intervening power did not initiate the intrusive projection of military power but acted in response to requests from the legitimate government; the intervention was mounted to preserve the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of a legally recognized government; the intervention was regulated by norms that typify interactions

between independent governments and was arranged through proper diplomatic channels or procedures; the forces deployed were not used to alter the internal or regional situation existing prior to the crisis that triggered the intervention in the first place; finally, the intervening power was not indiscriminate in its use of force, but deployed only forces appropriate to the actual threat facing the client and in ways that sought to allay the concerns of its superpower rival and avoid confrontation or exacerbation of tension.

Finally, high-risk intervention, viewed in the context of Soviet behavior in the Third World, would entail the following:

- an attempt to use the intervention to acquire a decided advantage over the United States,
- the use of Soviet forces to extend the USSR's control over the client state,
- the use of the intrusive military power to change the client's leadership,
- encouragement of the client to seek to alter the existing regional balance of power, and
- the deployment of Soviet forces to affect the outcome of a civil war.

As will be shown, the line between low-risk and high-risk intervention (which implies greater possibility of superpower confrontation) is not always easy to establish, because we are not calibrating inert or easily measured phenomena. At issue are very different policy assessments of the strategic relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States and very different prescriptions for coping with the Soviet challenge at the nonnuclear level of superpower interaction. Accordingly, since Soviet interventions in the Third World, although few in number, increased significantly in the 1970s, took place in regions and crises that could not be ignored by the United States, constituted unmistakable challenges to America's interests, credibility, and commitments in the regions involved, and acquired a potential for dangerously escalating superpower tensions, a brief review of their character and consequences is appropriate.

Moscow went from involvement to intervention toward the latter part of the Khrushchev period. The first venture, albeit tentative and ineffectual, was in Zaire in the late summer of 1960, when Soviet aircraft flew in small arms and supplies to help Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in his quarrel with the country's president, Joseph Kasavubu. In its attempt to affect the outcome of an incipient civil war, the USSR provided a few pilots and aircraft. After Lumumba's deposal at the end of September, its intervention on behalf of his heir, Antoine Gizenga in Stanleyville, was more blatant and, if undertaken today, theoretically high risk. However, it was really a low-risk affair, because of the USSR's insignificant logistical capability for projecting military power in Central Africa, a shortcoming Moscow worked

assiduously to overcome during the following decade. The result was displayed in Angola.

The second intervention occurred in Cuba and was divided into two phases. The low-risk phase began with heavy shipments of Soviet weapons several months after the failure in late April 1961 of the CIA-organized attempt at the Bay of Pigs to topple Castro. A year later, there were approximately 20,000 Soviet troops on the island, manning an impressive array of MIGs, SAMs, and patrol craft, as Moscow helped to entrench the anti-American regime in Havana and protect this internationally recognized government from possible invasion. However, the attempt to implant nuclear-tipped IRBMs in Cuba was a high-risk intervention that represented a quantum escalation of Soviet aims, having nothing to do with the protection of a client. The missile crisis of October 1962 was the result of a high-risk gamble that sought to exploit Third World real estate for the promotion of Soviet strategic objectives at a time of obvious nuclear inferiority to the United States. In a word, Moscow took its greatest risk to date in the Third World when, and because, the strategic balance was weighted heavily in favor of the United States. Nuclear inferiority, it needs to be stressed, did not prevent high risk-taking.

A third intervention was made in Egypt in the spring of 1970, during the final stage of the "war of attrition." After Israel's victory in the 1967 June War, the USSR mounted a costly program to rebuild the Egyptian and Syrian armed forces. By the fall of 1968, Nasser felt strong enough to commence a series of low-level military engagements along the Suez Canal against the Israeli occupiers of Sinai. Within a year, Nasser's "war of attrition" backfired, escalating to a major conflict, with Israeli air power pounding the Egyptians and threatening Nasser's very political life. Soviet air-defense forces saved him from defeat. The cease-fire agreement of 7 August 1970 came before the point at which the intervention might have assumed a high risk character, i.e., have involved Soviet forces in backing a crossing of the canal and a change in the status quo ante.

The fourth intervention came in October 1973. Three days after the Egyptian-Syrian attack on Israel, when the battle was tilting against its clients, the USSR launched its biggest air-supply operation in the Third World up to that time (the 1977-1978 airlift to Ethiopia was larger), transported four times as much materiel by sea, deployed a sizable fleet that served both to protect lines of supply and to signal the seriousness of its commitment, and placed its seven airborne divisions in a state of high alert for rapid deployment in the event that combat troops were needed to prevent the Israelis from marching on Cairo or destroying the surrounded Egyptian Third Army.

Though starting out as a low-risk intervention, Soviet behavior during the October War quickly escalated to the threshold of high risk, because of a

determination to shield clients from defeat, regardless of the possibility of confrontation with the United States. Moscow's behavior suggests three propositions for further consideration, namely, that the Soviet Union is prepared 1) to commit whatever forces are necessary to save a client from defeat; 2) to go to extraordinary lengths to deny victory to an American-supported client; and 3) to jeopardize détente with the United States if need be in order to safeguard a prized Third World client. The new (post-1970) risk-taking bent of Soviet operation in the Third World was perhaps most forcefully on display during the October War.

The fifth intervention—in Angola in 1975-1976—was distinctive in that it began before there was an internationally recognized government in Luanda. The Portuguese had agreed in January 1975 to grant Angola independence in November, and by March the USSR was already funneling military supplies to the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) via Congo-Brazzaville. Initially, the aim may have been to prevent a takeover by the Chinese-backed FLNA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola). By July, however, the MPLA was in the ascendancy. Crucial to its victory was the influx of several thousand Cuban combat troops (the number rose to 11,000 by early 1976), who were flown across in Soviet Ilyushin-62s, which refueled in Conakry, Guinea. This effort was buttressed by an airlift of AN-12s and AN-22s mounted by Aeroflot and by a substantial sealift, which had Soviet naval protection. This is an unambiguous instance of the USSR's projection of power in order to determine the outcome of a civil war and thereby refashion the strategic situation in southern Africa. Accordingly, it would seem to fall into the category of high risk; however, the publicly proclaimed and evident constraints placed on the US government's options undoubtedly convinced Moscow that it had nothing to fear from Washington and could proceed with relative impunity, suggesting that the Angolan affair was a much lower risk intervention than is usually bruited about in most analyses of the crisis.

The intervention in Ethiopia two years later was also a low-risk intervention, given its objectives of preserving the territorial integrity of a newly embraced client and expelling the invading Somalis from Ethiopian territory. The furor it created and the deleterious effects it had on the evolution of US-Soviet relations and on the consequent evolution and realignment of the policies and strategic environment of the Horn of Africa are beyond the scope of this paper. But in terms of the earlier criteria suggested for evaluating Soviet interventions and risk-taking, the Soviet action was a low-risk projection of military power.

A case can be made that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan started out in April 1978 as low-risk, but there can be no disputing the categorization of Soviet actions after 27 December 1979, as a high-risk intervention. For the first time in the Third World, the Soviet Union intruded its armed forces

blatantly into the domestic affairs of a friendly government in order to replace one pro-Soviet faction with another, more compliant one.

In evaluating the considerations that may have tipped the decision in the Kremlin in favor of intervention, contiguity should loom prominently, because it could occasion a similar high-risk Soviet move in Iran, if Iran's revolution were to veer to the pro-Soviet left in the wake of a post-Khomeini succession crisis and then be threatened with destabilization, counterrevolution, and an unsatisfactory satrap. Currently, this appears to be a most unlikely scenario, certainly compared to three or four years ago. Admittedly, Afghanistan's very contiguity limits the utility of the Afghan experience as a model for anticipating other possible high-risk Soviet moves in the Third World. Still the Afghan events demand very careful attention, not just because of the Gulf's importance and Moscow's willingness to assume additional costs in pursuance of imperial ambitions, but also because of what we can learn of the Soviet military's ability to adapt lessons learned in one theater of operations to another.

The USSR's most recent intervention occurred in Syria between late 1982 and early 1983, when it deployed SA-5s and thousands of air defense personnel in a measured response to Israel's battering of Syrian forces in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley in June 1982. Moscow's aims were to deter an Israeli attack on Syria and to signal the United States to rein in the Israelis, lest the superpowers become involved in a direct confrontation. Hafez Assad's strategic prudence had paid off: by signing a twenty-year treaty of friendship and cooperation on 8 October 1980, after almost a decade of Soviet cajoling, he had assured himself of Moscow's full support in the event of war with Israel. For its part, Moscow demonstrated anew that it would not stay on the sidelines and watch a prime client defeated by a US-backed rival.

In addition to the Third World leaderships that have already attracted some kind of direct Soviet military intervention, three other countries stand out as possible candidates: South Yemen, Libya, and Iran. Whether in accordance with existing treaty obligations, as in the case of South Yemen, or informal, still-secret, but presumably extensive promises, as in the case of Libya, or in quest of new geostrategic advantages, as in the case of Iran, the Soviet Union is very intimately interested in each of these countries and each is at the hub of a potentially explosive regional conflict.

Looking ahead, from the Kremlin's point of view, the three key Arab countries are Syria, South Yemen and Libya. The three share certain characteristics: they are anti-American; threatened by or at odds with a US-backed regional rival (other than Israel); assertive, ambitious, and apt to find themselves at war with a contiguous opponent; regarded with suspicion by their Arab neighbors; and heavily armed by the USSR to whom they are linked by treaties of friendship (in the cases of Syria and South Yemen) or by

elaborate military "understandings." There is every reason to assume that Moscow takes seriously its defense commitments, explicit or informal, to these unpredictable regional actors and that it would come to their assistance if they became involved in hostilities with a US client.

Militarily, Moscow has the air and seapower to project itself effectively into any crisis that might involve a prime client in the Eastern Mediterranean, on the North African littoral, or in the Yemeni part of the Arabian Peninsula. The assurance of land-based facilities in each of these sectors enhances the credibility of the Soviet commitment.

The case of a possible Soviet intervention in Iran has, for obvious reasons, attracted by far the most attention. Paradoxically though, for the foreseeable future, it may well be the least likely of the four. Iran is in a crisis, but unlike Syria, Libya, and South Yemen, it is strongly anti-Soviet, critical of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and unreceptive to Moscow's overtures for closer diplomatic and economic relations. Notwithstanding Iran's preoccupation with internal unrest and the war with Iraq, the Khomeini regime continues to denounce Moscow for its meddling in the Kurdish and Azerbaijanian areas of Iran, niggardly offers for Iranian natural gas, and its assistance to Iraq. Not even the protracted 444-day hostage crisis with the United States found Tehran receptive to Soviet blandishments of aid, transit rights or protection.

Moscow has adopted a watch-and-wait attitude, satisfied to see the deterioration of Iran's socio-economic situation and the polarization of the political system wrought by the hardline fundamentalists, operating through the ruling Islamic Republican Party. Even though the mullahs are anticommunist, their dissemination of a virulent anti-Americanism makes them inadvertent allies, meriting Moscow's forbearance; and even though Khomeini has decimated and outlawed the communist Tudeh Party since May 1983, the USSR's proximity and power make Moscow an ever present threat to the Iranian regime. But the threat is long term rather than imminent. As has been evident throughout the more than four year old Iran-Iraq War, the Soviet Union is not bent on disrupting the flow of Persian Gulf oil, and thereby triggering a confrontation with the United States. Nor is the USSR a military threat to Saudi Arabia or the Sheikdoms of the Gulf.

If the past record of direct Soviet interventions in the Third World has any predictive value for alerting us to the political requirements or circumstances that might induce Soviet leaders to move into Iran, the indications are that two preconditions would be essential. First, a friendly regime would have to emerge in Tehran. All previous Soviet interventions were mounted on behalf of friendly regimes, which took the initiative in inviting greater and greater Soviet commitments on their behalf. As long as the Khomeini regime remains bitterly hostile, Soviet-Iranian relations will remain cool and distant. Second,

involvement on behalf of the regime, which, of course, presupposes a very different attitude on the part of the government in Tehran. But even in the event that the Iranian government proved receptive to Soviet overtures and began, for example, to expand economic ties, purchase Soviet arms, and align itself with the Soviet position on various international issues, it would, if the past has relevance to projections for the future, have to intensify interactions at the political and military level. And this, in turn, would be the result of a serious and immediate external threat to the survival of the regime in Tehran. Barring a sudden magnification of the military threat from Iraq or an imminent American intervention to topple Khomeini or his successors, Iran's danger comes primarily from within, not from without. Without a request from a courted client, and with no friendship treaty to provide a legal cover, Moscow is not likely, judging from the case studies presented earlier, to intervene.

The absence of the above-mentioned circumstances, however, though it may decrease the possibility of Soviet intervention, does not eliminate it. Since history plays a significant role in Moscow's thinking about its relations with neighboring countries, Iran may well hold a special importance for Soviet leaders, who remember well that for most of the century prior to World War I northern Iran was a virtual Russian protectorate and pro-Russian Iranians generally reigned in Tehran. Such a situation is once again within reach. A state of quasi-anarchy or a weak central authority in Tehran might tempt some form of intervention under the terms of Articles 5 and 6 of the 1921 Soviet-Iranian treaty, periodic Iranian abrogations of which Moscow has chosen to ignore. Under the treaty, Soviet forces may unilaterally intervene in Iranian affairs in the interests of self-defense if a third country threatened to attack the Soviet Union from Iranian territory or if Moscow considered its border threatened. Moscow might exploit the treaty's provisions in one or more of the following ways: to encourage, as it did in 1945-1946, the establishment of separatist regimes in the Kurdish and Azerbaijanian provinces of Iran; to occupy Tehran and northern Iran—but not southern Iran and the oil fields—under the pretext of intervening temporarily to restore “law and order”; to occupy northern Iran in response to, or in anticipation of, an American seizure of Khuzistan, the strategically salient naval base at Bandar Abbas on the Strait of Hormuz near the entrance to the Gulf, and/or the smaller naval base (and surrounding territory) at Chah Bahar in Iranian Baluchistan, near the Pakistani border.

Under any variant of this general scenario, the Soviet intervention would be restricted to northern Iran, to that part of the country that had been under czarist influence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although obviously a stepping stone toward an eventual foothold on the Gulf, it would, as a czarist minister of foreign affairs wrote at the turn of the century, seek to make Iran “politically an obedient, i.e., sufficiently powerful, instrument in

our [Russian] hands, and, economically, to preserve for ourselves the large Persian market for a free application of Russian labor and capital." Southern Iran would be negotiable, depending on the US response. The Soviet leadership might well reason that if it did not threaten the oil areas of the Gulf, the United States would not go to war, and that a "deal" could be struck.

Under the worst case scenario—a sudden and unprovoked Soviet invasion of Iran—a Soviet-American confrontation becomes a near certainty. Such a contingency, however, is the least likely to occur—for the reasons set out above—not merely because of probable adverse political consequences, but also because of the very severe military constraints, which have been informatively and cogently developed by various Western specialists. A Soviet intervention in Iran, comparable with the takeover of Afghanistan in December 1979, poses formidable logistical problems for Kremlin planners. With three times the population of Afghanistan and two and a half times the land mass, Iran would be a far more costly and difficult venture. Moreover, at a time of great uncertainty in Central Europe, of US edginess over any threat to the security and stability of the Arabian Peninsula, and of looming succession travail in the CPSU, Moscow has strong reasons for restraint.

Attempts to establish connections between the strategic balance and Soviet risk-taking in the Third World face a myriad of methodological and conceptual hurdles. The root difficulty is determining the relevant data and criteria for assessing the strategic balance, compared to which establishing the parameters of risk-taking is relatively easy. American and Soviet perceptions and determinations of "strategic balance"—in Soviet parlance, commonly referred to as "correlation of forces"—are inherently asymmetrical, complicating comparison and opening the Pandora's box of contentiousness over threat assessment. Fundamentally, whereas the Americans stress the military component, the Soviets consider it only one of several key variables; and whereas US analysts devote preponderant attention to the nuclear dimension, the Soviets, in their published commentaries, write more about conventional forces—an emphasis that may, apart from a morbid sensitivity to security, stem from their historical experience, geographic situation, internal system, and imperial foreign policy. Moreover, as is sharply evident in their contrasting approaches to the regional arms races that each fuels, the former conceive of them as ancillary adjuncts of a military policy geared to the preservation of the status quo, whereas the latter, operating relentlessly at multiple levels to acquire incremental advantages that they believe over time will bring about qualitative shifts in regional and strategic balances, see them as integral to the prosecution of political and military struggle, as a way of eventually undermining the status quo.

There is no convincing evidence that the perceived state of the central strategic balance played any discernible role in Soviet decisions to mount

interventions or run risks. Even in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when it was clearly inferior to the United States in strategic weapons and delivery systems, the USSR pursued an active, far-ranging policy in the Third World that was aimed to weaken the Western position. The relative paucity of direct interventions (two in the 1960s compared to five in the 1970s) was more a function of limited opportunities and an inadequate power projection capability than of the state of the strategic balance. Inferiority was no bar to high risk-taking, as Cuba showed.

Three factors strengthen the assumption that Soviet risk-taking in the Third World will increase in the years ahead: the USSR's enormously enhanced capability to project military power beyond the confines of the Soviet bloc; its perception that the United States, notwithstanding greater defense spending, is increasingly constrained or unwilling to use its power for the promotion and defense of political-strategic objectives in the Third World (arms sales are no substitute for a coherent policy); and an increase in the opportunity factor, which derives from local and regional instability and the alacrity with which local actors turn to the Soviet Union in order to advance their own ambitions and acquire added leverage over the United States. This situation is unfolding concomitant with, yet independent of, the nuclear relationship between the superpowers.

The strategic balance is not apt to affect Soviet risk-taking, because both superpowers seem to share the conviction that a nuclear war is too high a price for marginal real estate; and because essential equivalence at the nuclear level seems destined to persist for the foreseeable future. If these assumptions are accurate, the Soviet Union will, accordingly, neither resort to its nuclear power to acquire some mere local advantage nor precipitate a nuclear confrontation by doing anything as rash as choking off Persian Gulf oil from the West and Japan.

Why the Soviet Union shoulders the burdens, bears the costs, and takes the risks it does in pressing its forward policy in the Third World in the face of seemingly limited, often ephemeral, gains perplexes many an analyst. We do know that the Soviet quest for influence remains unabated. In assessing the political utility of the USSR's Third World policy, it is important not to impute to Soviet leaders the yardsticks of success and failure that seem reasonable or compelling to us. There are three essential and distinctive ways one can characterize Soviet policy: superpower, imperial, and ideological. It is, I submit, the *imperial* model that holds the key to understanding Soviet behavior and anticipating future risk-taking—it combines the insights of historicity and contemporaneity with prognosis. There is still merit in Lord Palmerston's 1830s' aphorism, "It is always the policy and practice of the Russian Government to expand its frontiers as rapidly as the apathy and timidity of its neighbors permit, but to halt or recoil when met with determined opposition."