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THE SOVIET NAVY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

The buildup of Soviet naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean provides Moscow with new leverage in its dealings with the West in this vital area. However, this new capability should not be treated in isolation. From the Soviet view, the prospect of outflanking "Western containment" with its relatively new maritime capability must indeed be intriguing.

An article by

Captain Carl H. Amme, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

A key to understanding Soviet naval strategy in the Mediterranean is in examining separately the naval role in peacetime, in support of Soviet desires to extend its influence in the Middle East and North Africa, and the roles the Russian Fleets might be required to carry out in times of crises, conflict, and wars. The provision of economic and military assistance to the Arab Socialist States provides these nations with the means to threaten Israel and to exploit their rivalries with the traditional Arab States. The presence of Soviet warships in the ports of the client Arab States provides these nations with the symbol of support which gives them backbone and encourages them to subvert their traditional neighbors. Soviet naval presence in Alexandria, Port Said, and Latakia also provides a strong deterrent to Israeli reprisal attacks against these important port targets.

The frustrations we experience when we observe the skill with which the Soviets are exploiting their Navy and merchant marine in peacetime--for po-

litical and psychological purposes to gain positions of influence in the Middle East, in North Africa, and in other nations of the "Third World"--should not lead us to overlook the fact that these activities are not contrary to international law. While we may suspect their ultimate purpose, they are legal--and carefully so. They are, in fact, not so different from the activities of the 6th Fleet in the Mediterranean since World War II which have contributed so successfully to the establishment and maintenance of U.S. influence in Greece, Turkey, and Lebanon. The breakout of the Soviet Navy from its geographical maritime confinement under the international principle of "freedom of the seas"--a principle staunchly defended by the United States--is merely to adopt time-honored practices that court little risk except in time of war.

These practices represent a peacetime challenge to the United States to the extent that we permit a pattern to be established that would infringe on the

freedom of our operations. To avoid the harassment of Soviet warships entering our fleet formations during tactical exercises, we might be tempted to restrict our operations to the Western Mediterranean. This would be most unwise, for unless we continue to assert our right to operate in the international waters of the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Black Sea and to make regularly scheduled visits to friendly ports bordering these waters, we will only abet the Russians in their attempt to create the impression that the Eastern Mediterranean is "their lake"—an impression of recent years somewhat successfully created in the Baltic, as it has been for so long in the Black Sea.¹

We must keep in mind that the Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean in peacetime represent more of a psychological and political factor than an actual military threat. These forces are still smaller in number (though not in effectiveness) than the Italian Navy. To counter the Soviet gambit we must demonstrate our Navy's capability and resolve to go where we want to go without Soviet interference.

In contrast to the peacetime situation, in times of crisis and conflict Soviet naval forces in the Mediterranean Sea are a serious threat to U.S. interests. Owing to a host of causes and events associated with the creation of the state of Israel, Arab nationalism, and inept hunking on the part of the West, the Soviet Union over the last decade has established interests and influence in the Middle East at little risk. The presence of a strong Soviet fleet in the Mediterranean, the expanded Soviet support to the Arab Socialist nations, and the projected withdrawal of the British from the Persian Gulf area all tend to support the view that Soviet influence will expand in the area. There is little question that the Middle East with its rich oil resources and its geographical position as a tribridge between three continents remains a target of prime

strategic importance. It is only natural that the Soviet Union should seek to use its navy to defend and extend its interests and to limit the influence of the West. It is in this role of defending Soviet interests in time of crisis and conflict that the Soviet Navy threatens us the most.

Two confrontations in the Mediterranean area appear possible within the next decade: the Arab-Israeli conflict and Cyprus. To understand how the Soviet Navy threatens our interests we must first examine some of the strategic issues involved in these potential crises.

The immediate threat centers around the Arab-Israeli enmity. In the June 1967 war, the Soviet Union appeared indifferent to the security and integrity of Israel even though the Soviet Union recognized Israel's right to exist. The Soviets apparently calculated either that war would not result from Egypt's closure of the Tiran Straits or that the Arab nations had the administrative competence and military capability of defeating Israel or at least holding their own in a military conflict. The Soviet Union apparently calculated also that the United States would be deterred from intervening on the side of Israel—should the war go against that little nation. The statement by the State Department spokesman that the United States would remain "neutral" supported this view.²

Whether this thesis can be supported or not, the fact remains that, whatever the outcome, the Soviet Union stood to profit. If Egypt had succeeded in facing

¹Recent evidence suggests that the Soviet Navy is succeeding in establishing such a pattern. In recent months, the 6th Fleet has not visited any Eastern Mediterranean ports, except in Turkey. State Department opposition and public opinion in some cases restrict our port calls.

²Statement of Robert J. McCloskey, 5 June 1967 and Secretary of State Dean Rusk's elaboration, 6 June 1967, *The New York Times*, 6 and 7 June 1967.

Israel down over the Tiran Straits closure without a fight, a major diplomatic victory would have been won and the U.S.S.R. would have benefited from its staunch support. Had the Arab nations succeeded in defeating Israel in armed conflict, the United States might have been tempted to intervene. This would have turned the entire Arab world, finally united on this one issue, against the United States. Soviet influence in the Middle East would have become dominant. The third alternative, Arab defeat, would leave Nasser with no one to turn to except the Soviet Union, and this would give the Soviet Union the opportunity to regain influence as "a friend in need." In the outcome this is what happened, but the cost to Russia has been tremendous in resupplying Nasser's army and air force. There is a question, moreover, as to how permanent this influence will be. As David Brinkley put it, "The U.S. gave the Israelis no help which they didn't need. The Russians gave the Arabs no help, which they did need."

In this writer's view, this last point is something the Arabs will never forget.

What the Soviet Union may not have realized, except in retrospect, is the great risk of direct U.S. confrontation it would have run had the Arabs begun to defeat Israel. The United States might have found it impossible to stand idly by and witness the destruction of Israel. At the time, the United States may not have recognized the dangers inherent in this possible contingency and may have relied on what turned out to be a correct assessment of the capacity of Israel to defend itself. But the demonstrated decisiveness of air supremacy in the June 1967 war, particularly in the open physical environment of the Middle East, is a lesson that cannot be overlooked by the Arabs or by the two superpowers. One can well imagine the consequences of a renewal of the conflict in which the Arabs gain the strategic initiative by launching a tactical

surprise air attack against Israel. Perhaps Israel might be able to withstand the attack and, because of greater military competence, come back to win. But the possibility that Israel might not be able to do so cannot, in the future, be ignored in American and Soviet calculations.

War changes things, and there can never be a return to a strict status quo ante bellum. The considerations that led the U.S.S.R. to instigate or at least to give tacit acceptance to Arab activities that led to the June 1967 war may no longer hold true. For one thing, the Soviet Union has achieved an important increase of influence in Egyptian affairs. In the absence of renewed hostilities, the influence of the Soviet Union over the U.A.R. and other Arab Socialist States seems assured for some time to come. But the strengthening of Soviet influence, by its very nature, is tied to enlarging the Soviet commitment. In a renewed conflict the Soviet Union very likely might be forced to use its navy to support the Arab cause, rather than to be made out to be for a second time "a paper tiger." This would present hazards that the Soviet Union is not likely to relish.

hindsight has now had an opportunity to influence Soviet policy. Aside from the risk of a direct confrontation with the United States, Russia also has a stake in the permanent state of Israel, for without Israel as a "bete noir" there is no future for the Soviets in the U.A.R. As C.L. Sulzberger aptly points out, "Without Israel's implicit threat to the Arabs, Russia could never hope to retain their favor and thus entrench itself along the seaway to Asia."³ It must also be apparent that the United States would be strongly motivated to uphold the future territorial and national integrity of Israel, most particularly with the growing presence of the Soviet Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea.

³*The New York Times*, 9 February 1969.

Thus, on two counts it can be argued that the course of true Russian interest will run toward the maintenance of the status quo (of tension and turmoil) as it exists today.

The presence of the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean in effect limits American options. One can postulate that the Arab-Israeli conflict that erupted into full-scale war in 1948, 1956, and 1967 will very likely occur again within the next decade. Assuming that it does, it is unlikely that the Arabs could achieve a blitz victory against the well-trained Israeli forces. Nevertheless, should these circumstances obtain, there is a certain possibility that U.S. military forces may be alerted and amphibious forces deployed forward. There may be some problem obtaining air transit or landing rights, but a number of military options appear available:

(1) Provide Israeli with American aircraft in peacetime so that replacement aircraft can be ferried in to replace losses destroyed by the Arab surprise attack. (Pilots will have to have been trained in U.S. equipment.)

(2) Provide 6th Fleet air support to defend Israel.

(3) Make an MEU-size amphibious landing in Libya to secure and defend Wheelus Air Force Base for later Army-Air Force STRICOM operations.

(4) Make an MEF landing in Sinai or Israel.

(5) Make a STRICOM landing in Israel.

Soviet naval forces could hamper or even block all except the first and last option—just by their presence. In theory, actions could range from interference with air launch and ship-to-shore movement of troops to covert submarine hostile action or open combat operations on the side of the Arabs. But in an actual crisis, there is serious doubt that the Soviet Navy would undertake anything more than interposing or harassing tactics. The Soviets are not likely to do anything that might escalate

to a bigger war. But, equally, the United States might not want to risk a confrontation either, and therefore Soviet naval presence alone might result in no action by Washington decisionmakers. In any event, such naval presence would in effect narrow the number of U.S. options.

Of a totally different nature is the crisis contingency of Cyprus, one of the most intractable problems of the Eastern Mediterranean. Cyprus is not a case of subversion attempting to overthrow an established government. It is a situation where the Greek ethnic government seeks to impose its will on the Turkish minority of about one-fifth of the total population. It is an explosive situation where two of our allies, Greece and Turkey, might become embroiled in conflict. The crisis erupted in violence in 1964 and again in 1967. It is by no means settled. Conflict might flare up at any time, and the possibility that the United States may have to interpose military force between the Greeks and Turkey is real. In such circumstances the political constraints are heavy:

NATO has proven ineffectual.

UNICYP is severely constrained in its use of force for peacekeeping functions.

Airbases on the island are in the hands of Greek Cypriot armed forces. There are serious questions of the availability of airbases in NATO countries (except Greece) and even in Spain.

Diplomatic pressures would undoubtedly be exhausted. U.S. military alternatives that would seem to be available are:

(1) Interposing the U.S. 6th Fleet between the Turkish invasion forces and Cyprus;

(2) Landing an MEF to seize the Cypriot airfields to prevent a Turkish air invasion from Adana;

(3) Intervene with a joint air assault task force.

Alternative (2) would necessitate embarking the amphibious forces during

the tense diplomatic negotiations prior to the invasion. Such amphibious deployment might well deter the Turkish invasion. Alternative (3) might be considered hazardous without first ensuring the availability of the Cyprus airfields. In this case, an amphibious landing in Cyprus might be required to make a subsequent STRICOM deployment possible.

It is quite obvious that Soviet interest in this possible contingency would not be of the same order as in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, the U.S.S.R. has interjected itself in past flareups by offering aid to President Makarios. It is conceivable that the more militant stance recently taken by the Kremlin in the case of Czechoslovakia might lead the Soviet leaders to seize the opportunity to enter the dispute in a more concrete way. In any event, the presence of the Soviet Fleet in the Aegean will be an inhibiting factor that Washington decisionmakers must consider in selecting alternative courses of action.

In time of crisis or conflict, the Soviet Navy does indeed present an element of danger to be weighed in U.S. policy decisions leading to the commitment of forces. In the first place, it can be effectively interposed in waters needed by the U.S. Navy to facilitate military aid to a besieged ally. Second, the Soviet Union can and has provided naval ships and weapons that might be used in counternaval action against our Fleet to surrogate nations in North Africa and the Middle East. Some of the more underdeveloped nations are not so inclined to fear confrontation with the U.S. Navy as are the great powers (witness the *Pueblo* and the Gulf of Tonkin incidents). Although present evidence would suggest that most Soviet naval forces were designed for deterrence and defense of Russia's flanks, there are many indications that the Soviet Navy is now building ships appropriate for the support of amphibious

operations in a crisis or limited war environment. These naval capabilities become increasingly important as the Soviet Union challenges U.S. influence in areas *not* within the spheres of influence of either superpower—such as the Middle East and North Africa. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union can well afford to allow the other to gain a predominant position of influence in these areas.

Here we come to the crux of the matter: the uncertainties in assessing enemy intentions. It is all very well to claim that the Soviet Union operates on an opportunistic and low-risk policy. Based on this perception, some strategic analysts have suggested that the Soviet Union would have backed down in 1948 if we had sent an armored column up the autobahn when access to Berlin was blocked. Others have maintained that had the United States mined Haiphong Harbor the Soviet Union would have done no more than to protest. But we can never be sure, for the motivation that impels either superpower to use military force to assert or preserve its influence may be as much dependent upon the political tensions between the two nations as upon the importance of any specific issue in dispute. The Middle East and North Africa for example, did not become important to the United States until Russian influence began to penetrate into the area. Malta did not become important to the United States until Russia displayed an interest in its shipyard. For years we have taken for granted our dominant influence in the Mediterranean. Now it is being challenged, and the hegemonial tensions of the cold war are making themselves felt. The conflict of interests over well-defined objectives becomes subordinate to the passionate quality of ideologies whose aim is to assert prestige and test resistance. What is at stake in the hegemonial tensions between the superpowers is domination. These tensions are heightened or relaxed according to

the specific competing issues at the moment, but in essence it is they which are the driving force that submerges identifiable political issues and threatens to lead to conflict.

Domination of the entire area is not, therefore, a prerequisite objective for the present drive to extend Soviet influence into North Africa and the Middle East. Already the Soviet Union has extensive influence in Algeria, Egypt, and Yemen, and its influence is spreading to the People's Republic of South Yemen. The reopening of the Suez Canal, as Professor Edward L. Beach points out, "will, at a single stroke, put Russia on interior lines of communication to the Indian Ocean and all the countries on its littoral."

The Soviet Navy, as it is being used towards psychological and political ends, is a present and potential threat to Western prestige and freedom of action in the Mediterranean Sea and its environs. Further, the resultant "heating up" of tensions between the two superpowers in this region is a threat to stability within the entire international community.

It is logical that the Soviets, in their use of maritime power for cold war ends, should proceed from the Mediterranean Sea into the Indian Ocean area. With the eventual opening of the Suez Canal, the opening of a southern sea route to Siberia as well as the establishment of trade and friendly relations with the nations bordering the Indian Ocean become realistic objectives. Such a move would counter Western influence in the Afro-Indian Ocean region and, at the same time, bring East African and South Asian economic potential

into the Soviet orbit. This prospect must be extremely intriguing for Soviet planners, who for so long have viewed "Western Containment" from the *inside* and now see an opportunity to become actively involved in the worldwide maritime action.

Communications dominate war; broadly considered, they are the most important single element in strategy, political or military.

Mahan: *The Problem of Asia*, 1900

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Capt. Carl H. Amme, Jr., U.S. Navy (Ret.), did his undergraduate work at the U.S. Naval Academy (Class of 1936), holds a master's degree in international relations from the American University, and is currently completing work on his Ph.D. at the University of Southern California. He attended the National War College, served as an adviser to the NATO Defense College, Paris, and recently authored *NATO without France* (Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, 1967).

Captain Amme joined the staff of Stanford Research Institute in 1962. Since that time he has been engaged in research on strategic concepts, projections of future military/political environments, roles and missions and problems of national defense. He directed a 2-year study to analyze the consequences of various arms control and disarmament concepts on the capabilities of military forces in the European environment. He has participated in studies dealing with the role of missile defense in Soviet strategy, conflicting views of NATO nations on the use and control of nuclear weapons, deterrence in the 1970 era and the role of the Navy, future concepts of seapower, and strategic projections for the Middle East.
