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SUBJ: AMERICA'S STAKE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

My topic today is the Mideast -- its importance to the United States and her allies and, more generally, to the cause of world peace and stability--for the Mideast cannot, of course, be looked on in isolation from broader events involving the superpowers, the industrialized world, and the general play of power relationships which influence the mainstream of world events.

For that reason I want to address the Mideast in the context of U.S.-Soviet relations and, more specifically, against the backdrop of the Soviet design to continue shifting the worldwide balance of power to its own advantage or as the Soviets repeatedly say, "To continue the shift in the correlation of forces."

Not surprisingly, I will give particular attention to the role in Mideast stability played by the naval forces which we traditionally have deployed along the sea approaches to that region -- in the Eastern Mediterranean and, on a similar scale, in the Indian Ocean and its northward extensions, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

In this connection it is fair to say that while the total military strength of the United States has been an important factor influencing events in the Mideast, it has been the presence of U.S. naval forces adjacent to the scene of Mideastern events that has exerted the decisive influence at key points where the vital interests of this country and its allies were involved.

This fact has not been lost on the Soviets, and its accounts to a large degree for their own efforts to gain maritime predominance in the waters which surround the Mideast on three of its four sides. For acquisition of such predominance would give the Soviets, who already possess overwhelming land and air power along the region's northern periphery, a position of unassailable military superiority in this area of such great strategic, economic and political importance.

Soviet strategists never tire of pointing out -- I think correctly -- that no single event would more decisively shift the global balance to the USSR's advantage than the Soviet Union's acquisition of predominant influence in the Mideast. It becomes vitally important, then, to look carefully at the impressive steps they have already taken toward that goal.

Two decades ago the Russians were an inconsequential -- though hardly disinterested -- power in the Mideast. By the late 1950s, as Walter Laquer presciently observed in 1958, they had recognized the potential which exploitation of Arab nationalism offered for the advancement of Soviet hegemony in the Mideast. And they proceeded to capitalize on that powerful psychological force for their own ends, while simultaneously building up military capabilities that could be used in the Mideast, with particular emphasis on naval and airborne forces.

After 1967 they accelerated both lines of attack, increasing their military supply to the Arabs -- and exacerbating

Arab-Israeli tensions in the process -- while concurrently deploying a large, permanent naval force to the Mediterranean where it was supported by an extensive base complex built in Egypt. Those naval bases, incidentally, have continued to be used by the Soviets without interruption since their construction in the late 1960s, undisturbed by the periodic perturbations in Soviet-Egyptian political relations.

By 1970 the Soviets' plan to shift the power balance in the Eastern Mediterranean had proceeded far enough that they thought a probe of U.S. resolve might have some payoff. This resulted in the Jordan crisis of September 1970 -- the first crisis, incidentally, with which I had to deal after assuming office as Chief of Naval Operations.

In this crisis the Soviet Union, having in mind the steps it had taken to improve its power position in the Mediterranean and believing that those steps should have changed some perceptions and possibly U.S. political will, decided to test the waters.

The Syrian army invaded Jordan. Three things went wrong with the Soviet calculation, however. The Jordanian Army fought better than had been expected; the Israelis moved their forces northward and were clearly ready to play a role; and the United States mustered its power, including the reinforcement of the SIXTH Fleet with a third carrier task force, and with Marines embarked on an amphibious assault carrier.

This calculus of factors led the Soviets to conclude that the "correlation of forces" needed to be shifted further before they could count on seriously inhibiting U.S. behavior in the region.

They received a strong dressing down from us at the time. They promised the Syrians they would replace their losses in exchange for their acquiescence to Syrian withdrawal. The arms and re-training for the Syrians went forward. The conscious Soviet policy of arming all the Arabs who were willing to cooperate with them was accelerated.

The training of the Arab forces in Egypt and Syria was so successful that, as you know, they achieved strategic surprise when, in October 1973, they began the attack which very nearly unhorsed Israel.

On this occasion only the massive airlift and sealift of supplies ensured Israeli ability to turn the situation around and enter into a cease-fire with reasonable confidence in Israel's ability to defend its vital interests should fighting resume.

But the margin of American power that could be mustered in the Eastern Mediterranean proved thinner this time than in any crisis during the two decades preceding.

The Soviets, almost overnight, built up their Mediterranean Fleet to an unprecedented figure of more than 90 ships, outnumbering the SIXTH Fleet by 50%. We sent a third carrier into the Med; but the combination of Soviet

missile power aboard surface ships and their large number of submarines, coupled with aircraft operating from bases in the Soviet Union and possibly from Syria, Egypt and Yugoslavia would have put us at a pronounced disadvantage had the Soviets launched a surprise attack against our naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Those forces, I might add, could count on no support from our own land-based air in the region, since our sometime NATO allies denied us the use of tactical air facilities on their territory during the crisis.

This points up another fact of some significance. The security of the U.S. airlift to Israel depended entirely on the protective umbrella of the SIXTH Fleet's missile ships and carrier aircraft for safe transit over the Mediterranean. In the absence of that protection our unarmed transports would have been fair game for Soviet or Arab fighters operating from bases along the length of the southern Mediterranean littoral; and there is evidence, by the way, that serious consideration was given to this option by elements in the Arab hierarchy.

While moving to negate our initial naval advantage in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Soviets at the same time acted to capitalize on their geographic proximity to the conflict by readying ground and tactical air units for rapid introduction into the Mideast. Simultaneously they increased the readiness of their other military forces in a manner which signalled total seriousness of intent. This, incidentally, preceded

by days -- even weeks in some instances -- the moderate increase in readiness of our own forces worldwide on the night of 24-25 October. The Soviets, as is their fashion, were prepared to move massively, if necessary, with sufficient force to overwhelm all opposition and establish clear-cut Soviet military superiority in the area of operations.

Though our Secretary of State promised at the time to tell the full story behind the U.S. alert, 'in about one week' the facts have never been revealed to the American public, probably because they are totally inconsistent with the image of a Soviet Union complying with the basic groundrules of detente which we were led to believe had been agreed upon at two summits preceding the October crisis.

You all know what has happened since October 1973. The Soviets have re-armed the Syrians to a level beyond that they possessed before the war. They have resumed deliveries to Egypt, holding out full-scale rearming as a lure for Egyptian concessions on political and air-basing issues. There are reports of a massive arms-for-bases agreement with Libya. Those reports may be premature, but we know that discussions on this topic have been going on for some time. And in the naval area, the Soviets continue to shift the balance to our disadvantage. Their first multi-purpose carrier, the KIEV,

will become operational this year. (I forecast, incidentally, that within the lifetime of most of you, you will see a larger Soviet carrier fleet than we have.)

In anticipation of the Suez Canal's re-opening, the Soviets have moved to acquire control over maritime traffic using that key waterway by establishing their major Indian Ocean base at Berbera, in Somalia, dominating the Red Sea approaches to Suez. The Soviets' Somalia base complex provides ship and submarine repair facilities, family housing, a large fuel depot, a communications station, two military airfields, and an expensive new missile storage and maintenance facility. This capability -- several years in the making -- exceeds substantially in scope the modest improvements we have planned for our logistics facility at Diego Garcia, which remain the subject of continuing Congressional debate. Across from Berbera they exercise predominant influence, and enjoy access to the facilities controlled by the radical Arab regime in Aden. A less impressive but useful set of facilities in Iraq provides additional air and base support for the Soviet Navy.

Their Indian Ocean fleet continues to be the largest outside force in the region -- a distinction the Soviets have enjoyed for over five years now.

Last month the Soviets gave us a rare look at the totality of their naval capabilities in an operational setting when they staged a worldwide naval exercise called OKEAN -- a successor to a similarly named exercise conducted five years ago. Their

operations in this year's OKEAN gave us some confirming clues about the way they would employ their Navy in future contingencies, and highlighted the remarkable progress they have made since OKEAN in 1970.

This year's exercise involved more than 220 ships and hundreds of naval aircraft. It was, in fact, the largest naval exercise conducted by any country since the end of World War II, and may have been the most elaborate in modern history.

The major purpose of the exercise was to test Soviet plans and the readiness of naval forces to carry them out on a global scale.

More than seven years ago, the Soviet Navy's commander, Admiral Gorshkov, stated that "the Soviet Navy has been converted, in the full sense of the word into an offensive, long-range armed force." He also stated with obvious pride that the U.S. must understand its predominance on the seas has come to an end.

OKEAN 1975 demonstrated how far the Soviets have come toward realization of both those goals. It has been the Politbureau's objective, since the Cuban missile crisis, to build a Navy capable of destroying western (and that means mainly American) seapower in order to deny us the ability to use the oceans for our own vital military and economic purposes.

An integral part of this strategy is a Soviet capability to sever the sea lines of communication which connect us with our allies, and with key sources of raw materials.

In this respect, it is clear that the Arab oil embargo of 1973-74 reinforced the Soviet view that the dependence of the United States and its allies on the sea for energy resources and essential military reinforcement constitutes a serious vulnerability which should be heavily exploited by Soviet strategy.

We saw reflection of this in the 1975 version of OKEAN where, for the first time, the oil routes of the Indian Ocean and South Atlantic figured prominently in Soviet exercise activity. The Soviets, I might add, recognize that the capability to cut off western oil gives them great political leverage, even if they never exercise that capability in an operational sense.

Other countries' knowledge that they are vulnerable to such Soviet action either consciously or unconsciously predisposes them to an attitude of accommodation to Soviet demands.

In my judgment, the Soviet Navy has demonstrated that it has already substantially achieved the capability to perform its own, easier naval mission of denying us free use of the seas; and I believe the events of the recent exercise lend additional weight to this judgment.

Let me give you a feeling for what the Soviets did during OKEAN.

During the early part of April, the Soviets began deploying surface, submarine and air units in preparation for the exercise. Surface ships were deployed from all fleet areas and positioned in the Norwegian Sea, North Atlantic, Mediterranean, Pacific, and Indian Ocean. At least two groups were observed in the Atlantic, one north of the Azores and one to the south of Iceland. An additional task force operated in the Norwegian Sea northeast of Iceland while a task group operated in the central Mediterranean. Four separate groups operated in the Pacific Ocean with one group southeast of the Kamchatka Peninsula, one to the east of Japan, one northeast of the Caroline Islands and a final group just south of the Sea of Japan. Long-range naval aircraft deployed to Indian Ocean and West African bases as well as to the Caribbean. The ships and aircraft were in position by mid-April when exercise play began.

The first stage was a large-scale, open-ocean surveillance effort by Soviet naval aircraft. If one looks at a map of

Soviet reconnaissance and exercise activity, one finds that they concentrated on the most likely -- and most important -- sea lines of communications. For example, long range "Bear" aircraft operated from Cuba and Guinea, on the west African coast, providing coverage of the southern sea routes and those bound for the Mediterranean. The Mid-Atlantic and Northern sea routes were covered by long-range reconnaissance flights operating from bases in the Soviet Union. Similarly in the Pacific, reconnaissance aircraft covered the approaches to Japan and Korea.

One of the main differences from the 1970 exercise occurred in the Indian Ocean, where anti-submarine and long-range reconnaissance aircraft conducted patrols for the first time in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean area. These operations were carried on in conjunction with the large Soviet fleet east of Somalia, and provided coverage of the maritime routes which carry Persian Gulf oil to Europe, Japan, and the United States.

During the attack phase of the exercise, widespread anti-ship operations were conducted. The focus of these strikes was forces probably simulating a NATO carrier task group in the Norwegian Sea. Additionally, strikes were launched against another group in the same general region which was probably acting as a convoy. This sort of activity, I might add, is traditional in Soviet naval exercises; and typically is designed to destroy forces that could pose a threat to Soviet bases or offensive operations; and generally to

challenge our forces for predominance in the North Atlantic. Of particular interest in this part of the exercise was the Soviets' employment, for the first time, of their new "BACKFIRE" long-range attack aircraft over the North Atlantic in simulated strikes against western ships. The advent of this aircraft in the Soviet Navy's inventory significantly increases the air threat to our sea routes, putting additional demands on our steadily shrinking number of aircraft carriers. Further to the south a large group of Soviet ships was operating northeast of the Azores, acting as the target for anti-shipping operations.

Similarly in the Pacific, anti-shipping operations were conducted against a group proceeding northward off the east coast of Japan, and a second group northbound in the southern Sea of Japan.

Surface ships, submarines and aircraft conducted a variety of operations in the Arabian Sea during the attack phase. Two of the Soviet "May" maritime patrol aircraft, flying out of Berbera on the Gulf of Aden, were observed conducting operations with a Soviet cruiser, a missile destroyer and other surface ships. Long range aircraft, operating from bases in the Soviet Union, were also seen in the vicinity of this task force, rounding out the Soviet capability in this critical sea area.

The Soviets clearly demonstrated their capability to deploy and support on a simultaneous basis highly capable naval

forces to all important maritime areas worldwide. Not only did they dispatch surface forces to these areas, but they supported them with land-based aircraft from bases in the Soviet Union and on the territory of Soviet clients and allies overseas. While it is difficult to be specific about submarine operations, the large emphasis placed on anti-shipping operations, convoys, and anti-submarine warfare suggests a major deployment of Soviet submarines in most of the areas of exercise activity.

What comes out of all this is clear evidence that the Soviets have developed naval power capable of challenging the West's traditional control of the seas. I have no doubt that the Soviets, already close to their goal of denying us use of the seas in the areas that matter, have as their ultimate objective the ability to control the seas for their own military and political purposes. Their massive maritime building program -- second only to that of the U.S. World War II expansion -- is producing dramatic results at a time when the U.S. Navy is falling to its lowest level since before World War II. The capability of the Soviets to deploy and maintain such a large number of highly capable and modern combatants attests to the success of their program, and underlines the dramatic shift in the naval balance that has occurred in the past decade.

The lesson for us is that we are approaching the point where our political and military options will be seriously constrained.

in future contingencies, unless we act decisively now to redress this shifting balance.

We are absolutely dependent on the seas -- both for our own survival, and for the support, in the crunches, of our friends and allies.

The Soviets suffer from no such dependence on the seas; but they see a massive strategic pay-off in reversing the situation which prevailed at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. In that episode, faced with U.S. naval predominance, they could not support a distant friend, separated from the Soviet Union by vast oceanic distances. They would like to reverse the balance and impose a similar liability on us in future crises. If they succeed, they will be well on the way to mastery of the Eurasian continent, including the Mideast land-bridge, with all its resources, and the bonus of access to the unexploited wealth of Africa.

This is why a group of distinguished national leaders, comprising the U.S. President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, over a year ago surveyed the shifting naval balance and concluded that we were already beyond the peril point, and that a massive national commitment to recovery of our naval predominance was essential if we were to avoid grave risks in the future. One member of this Panel has subsequently become Vice President of the United States.

The specifics of the report remain classified. But its basic conclusions should be made available to the Congress

and the public now, so that informed judgments can be made about the state of our current capabilities, and the policy limitations that flow from our continued weakness.

We have recently seen the example of a decisive President acting with courage to uphold the principle of our right to use the seas without interference for our essential purposes. That action sent important signals to friends and adversaries alike.

We had a test of wills in October 1973; and the Soviets clearly were willing to go all the way at that time, if the survival of their Arab allies was in jeopardy. We accommodated to that fact in that crisis. Looking at the trends, I cannot be confident that in future confrontations with the Soviet Union our military leadership will be able to tell the President that he has any other alternative.

The Russians have already locked in a potentially wide margin of strategic superiority through cleverly managed arms control negotiations.

They continue psychologically to disarm the U.S. and its allies through the notion of detente -- which means something totally different to them from what it means to us.

They go on expanding their traditional superiority in land-based power on the Eurasian continent.

They pursue a mischievous policy in the Mideast, designed to expand their own power and influence, even at the risk of major war.

And now they have mounted a vigorous attack on the one military area in which they have not yet achieved clear-cut predominance; and, ironically, the one area in which we must retain superiority in order to survive.

My successor, Admiral Holloway, has recently said that we need at least a 600-ship Navy to have a reasonable margin of assurance that we can continue to use the seas for our essential economic and military purposes.

We have less than 500 today, about the same number as in 1939, and the money being asked from Congress this year (which the committees have already cut) will only let us hold our own at that level, but will not move us toward the 600 goal (which, incidentally, is more than 300 ships fewer than the Navy had when I became CNO almost five years ago.)

Numbers of ships are, of course, only a very indirect measure of naval capability. The real question is whether the total numbers of ships and aircraft together with all of the assistance which might be rendered by other forces is adequate to permit the U.S. to keep the sea lines open in a war at sea. It is clear to me, that the odds are, that these total forces today are grossly inadequate.

We must have an adequate maritime capability. The Navy represents the force on which the President calls time and again to serve the vital interest of the United States and its allies in emergencies short of major war. Its importance

increases even more as we lose our welcome in bases overseas. And it is absolutely essential to our survival in war.

The lesson is that we must be second to none at sea. The Russians recognize this fundamental fact and have mounted an aggressive challenge to our predominance. We cannot let them prevail. The cost of our staying ahead is miniscule compared to the stakes involved.

I have no doubt that the American people will support this proposition, if given the facts. They have never failed to respond adequately when they understood the problem. We must stop glossing over the magnitude of the shift in the worldwide balance, however, and make clear to the public the consequences of allowing the Soviets to gain predominance in those elements of military power which are essential to our own, and the democratic world's survival.

We must rebuild the foundations of our own security; and discard the illusion that reliance on the Soviet Union's benign intentions lessens the need for adequate military strength.

We must shift our foreign policy priorities, giving first attention to solidifying badly eroded relationships with our friends and allies, and recognize that this offers a far firmer basis for our security than any ephemeral influence which detente may provide us over essentially trivial aspects of Soviet behavior.

We have learned the hard way that Soviet pledges have little staying power; and that agreements with the USSR will be honored only so long as they continue to serve unilateral Soviet interests.

The Mideast is where all these considerations converge, because it is there that the risk of U.S.-Soviet confrontation remains highest; and it is also there that the strength of

U.S. commitments is most likely to be put to the test over the next several years.

In October 1973 we did not have a decisive margin of military capability and the Soviets achieved the release of the Egyptian Third Army.

Since that time the Russians have been working assiduously to accelerate the shift in the military balance -- both regionally, and between the superpowers; and they have scored some conspicuous successes.

We cannot let our power relative to the Soviet Union continue to deteriorate. And above all else, we must not let our naval power continue to drift further below the margin of safety. If we do, we will soon find ourselves living in a totally different kind of world from that which we have known since the end of World War II. I don't think that any of us wants to undergo that experience -- and all of the risks that it inevitably entails. It is sobering to keep in mind that we have no experience of dealing with the USSR under conditions of clear-cut Soviet military superiority. We can still reverse the trend, but it will require an informed public supporting concerted national effort.

I sense little doubt in this group that that effort is worth making, and that is the message I enlist your help in carrying to the American people.