Introduction

The Middle East has never been a region of primary Soviet interest yet it has upon occasion played a role of inordinate significance for Soviet foreign policy-makers. In terms of Soviet foreign-policy priorities, one could posit two constants uppermost in the minds of the Soviet leadership, be it under Stalin, Malenkov, Khrushchev, or Brezhnev. The first would be protection and defence of the Soviet Union; the second would be the East-West (communism versus capitalism) struggle. The interpretation of these two priorities has varied, determining the relative importance as well as the nature of other priorities.

Beginning with a minimalistic, purely defensive approach, the highest priority would go to protecting Soviet borders, or preserving the Soviet homeland from outside attack. That has often been interpreted as the need to maintain a security belt or buffer zone just beyond Soviet borders, that is, the maintenance of friendly regimes and denial of hostile forces in areas just beyond the border. As the traditional invasion route, particularly of major powers, Eastern Europe has taken the highest priority, followed by the borders in the Far East, with China and facing Japan, and then the southern borders in south-west Asia and finally the Middle East, usually in that order. What began as a continental approach, accompanied by a conventional force military doctrine eventually became both a power projection, overseas thrust, accompanied by a doctrine of nuclear deterrence suited to continental as well as global aspirations. Strength in Europe remained the primary concern, as the focal point of both military and industrial power as well as the major theatre of potential conflict, while the United States as the powerful leader of the western alliance became the primary adversary. Asia was second to this, with overseas regions serving only an auxiliary role, although one which nonetheless increased in importance as nuclear warfare reduced the likelihood of war in Europe.

Such military priorities which could very broadly be defined in
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terms of defence and protection have, of course, been closely connected with if not actually dictated by Soviet competition with other powers, primarily the capitalist West – led by the United States – but in time, also Communist China. Maintenance of the leadership of the world Communist movement in the face of competition from China assumed only slightly lower priority than the ideological struggle with the West. Both competitions entailed the expansion of Soviet influence and, as in the military sphere, this moved from the periphery of Soviet borders outwards and even overseas, for reasons specific to the competition with each opponent. Competition, as well as various interpretations as to just what constitutes strength, had economic as well as military, political, and ideological aspects. While the economic factor itself varied in importance from Soviet leadership to leadership, it did not on the whole alter the overall picture of Soviet priorities. For it too dictated a dominant role for the East–West relationship, be it in a competitive mode through foreign aid to the Third World or détente-related cooperation.

As a Third World region to the south of the Soviet Union, and in part contiguous with it, the Middle East has assumed importance, albeit after that of other border areas, in Soviet defence priorities. It has assumed occasionally more critical importance, however, in the context of Moscow’s East–West competition or global role. It is this combination of the competitive and the defence role which has placed the Middle East relatively high within the category of Third World regions. As a region of close proximity to the Soviet Union but of vital interest to the West, it is one in which both super powers have become directly involved, raising the risk-potential of the area itself. This in turn has sporadically catapulted the region to a high-priority position in Soviet foreign policy, in direct connection with the superpower relationship.

This study examines the evolving interests of the Soviet Union in the Middle East and the pursuit of these interests since World War Two. Focusing on Soviet relations with the various actors in the region, up to the rise of Gorbachev in Moscow, particular attention is given to the crises within the Middle East and the often critical decisions connected with them. It is these crises, especially the Arab–Israeli crisis, which provided the Soviet Union with a central vehicle for the pursuit of its interests. But they also highlighted the overriding importance of the Soviet–American rivalry. Local and regional, in addition to the global problems connected with the pursuit of Soviet interests in the area will also be examined, demonstrating the
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The complexity of the issues facing Soviet policy-makers for this region. The area as one of newly independent states, national liberation movements and national minorities; radical and conservative ideologies, Islamic fundamentalism, Arab socialism and communism; pro-western regimes, even one NATO state, and changing internal rivalries and alliances as well as coups, counter-coups, and revolution has posed a continuous challenge for Moscow. The possibility of differing responses and divergent views among Soviet policy-makers themselves is also taken into account in the study of the variegated nature of Soviet policies towards the region.

Gorbachev’s approach to these problems and crises marks a change in Soviet Middle East policy, within the overall attempt to transform Soviet foreign policy. This attempt, guided by Gorbachev’s ‘new thinking’ regarding the nature of international relations, the role of the Soviet Union in the world, the Soviet–American relationship, Soviet military doctrine, and the place of the Third World, has clear ramifications for Soviet policies in the Middle East. At the same time, because of its multi-faceted importance, as a region bordering on the Soviet Union, the scene of direct super-power involvement, and as a part of the Third World which holds economic as well as political, ideological and strategic value, the region assumes some importance in Gorbachev’s foreign-policy considerations. Thus, the nature of Soviet policy towards the actors and crises within the region may well be an indication, if not a test case, of the depth and significance of the ‘new thinking’ altogether.
1 Soviet policy-making in the Middle East: from Stalin to Brezhnev

The decision-makers

The Soviet political system was based upon parallel bureaucracies, of the party and the government, with ultimate authority resting within the highest party body. The legitimacy for this authority was found in the Soviet constitution itself, which proclaimed the Communist Party the leading political force in the country. It derived, however, from the Leninist concept of the party and, to some degree, practices introduced by Stalin. Lenin had originally conceived of the idea of a party for the purposes of organizing, educating and leading the proletarian masses who apparently were unaware of their plight and the historic role envisaged for them by Marx and Engels. According to Lenin, imperialism had accorded the capitalist system a respite and enrichment which benefited the workers, albeit temporarily, as well. Class warfare born of the impoverishment of the working class and the decimation of the middle class by cut-throat capitalist competition had given way to class cooperation and the growth of the middle class due to this temporary rise in the standard of living in imperialist capitalist societies. The workers had, in this sense, been lulled to torpor by the satisfaction of their immediate needs (concerning wages, hours, work conditions and the like) achieved through what Lenin derisively termed ‘trade unionism’. What was needed was an awakening of the workers to their real needs, which lay with the abolition of private property and the elimination of the capitalist system as such.

The party, that is, a group of professional revolutionaries who understood and could express the real as distinct from transitory interests of the proletariat was the answer to this situation. The party would be built along almost military lines of strict discipline, based on Lenin’s concept of democratic centralism. Structured hierarchically as a pyramid, the party would be composed of individual cells at the base, independent of each other as befits the security considerations of
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an underground organization in the days of the Czar, which would feed information, ideas and proposals upward to the party bodies at the pinnacle. Decisions would then be taken at the top level, where the small leadership was the one body which had a total picture. Once decisions were taken they were disseminated downward and were to be obeyed. Further debate, opposition or appeal was forbidden beyond discussion of implementation only.

Institutionally the party would be composed of the cells or branches at the bottom, which elected representatives to a party Congress which met periodically (roughly every five years in post-Stalin times). This Congress would in turn elect a Central Committee with a Secretariat to run day-to-day party affairs, and a Politburo (sometimes called a Presidium) to lead the party. Most but not necessarily all members of the Secretariat came to be full or candidate (non-voting) members of the Politburo, which itself was run by the Chairman of the party (at certain times called, rather, Secretary General) who, together with the Politburo was elected by the party Congress.

Once it came to power, the party, as the expression of the real interests of the proletariat, was to assume the commanding positions in the society, in the name of the proletariat. As Stalin later put it, the party, as the organization of those who knew and understood best what was necessary, would function as a general staff, leading society in the interests of the workers. It would do so quite directly, by the placement of party representatives in all institutions and organizations of the society; such representatives would convey the policies decided by the party and ensure their implementation. In this sense, under Stalin’s interpretation if not that of Lenin, the various institutions of society, including governmental, scientific, cultural, judicial, legislative and mass organizations or bodies were to become transmission belts for the will of the proletariat, reflecting their interests, as expressed by the party.

This system had further justification in the Marxist explanation of society as divided into production base (means of production and relations to production) and a superstructure consisting of all else (government, science, culture and so forth). In any society, the superstructure was but a reflection or expression of the base, so in a proletarian society it was natural that the superstructure would be of a proletarian nature, just as in bourgeois society, the government, culture and other institutions were bourgeois in nature, serving the ruling bourgeois class and the capitalist form of production.

In this way a parallel party structure grew, at least with regard to the
government. For every government ministry or office there came a rough equivalent within the party, in the form of a department or section in the Central Committee. The task of these bodies was to formulate and disseminate party policy, after approval by the superior party organs, namely the Secretariat and, if necessary, the Politburo, to the respective government or other bodies. The latter would also formulate their own proposals as well as provide information, both of which would be disseminated not only vertically within the government bureaucracy but also horizontally to the appropriate party counterpart, be it at the level of ministry department to Central Committee department, for example, or Minister level to party Secretary. The highest governmental level would report to the Politburo, from which it received its guidelines just as the subordinate government bodies received theirs from the subordinate party bodies. Often, though not always, this was achieved through the serving of one and the same person as head of a government bureaucracy such as the Foreign or Defence Ministry or the KGB and as a member of the Politburo, just as sometimes the head of the party and the nominal head of the government were one and the same person.

In the area of foreign affairs, therefore, there was the International Department (ID) of the Central Committee, which, aside from considering and possibly forwarding for approval the policy proposals received from the Foreign Ministry, sent its own recommendations via the responsible party secretary up to the Politburo. The ID had the advantage of receiving information not only from the Foreign Ministry but from its own party representatives and, possibly, other bureaucracies. Certainly the Politburo had the advantage of receiving from and controlling all the bureaucracies, including the army and the security forces, which at lower levels were, like the Foreign Ministry, subordinate to a Central Committee department. Initially the ID was charged with relations with non-ruling Communist parties, parallel to the central committee department dealing with ruling Communist parties. In the 1950s, however, its functions were expanded to include policy regarding all non-Communist states. From this time, until Gorbachev, the ID was headed by candidate Politburo member and party secretary Boris Ponomarev, who was believed to be subordinate to the far more powerful party ideology chief and full Politburo member Mikhail Suslov.

Khrushchev, who expanded the role of the ID, also set up a series of research institutes, some in the party, but most in the Academy of Sciences, which also dealt with international affairs and subjects of
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foreign policy. The most prestigious and important of these was the Institute for World Economy and International Affairs (IMEMO), but there were also area institutes, such as the Africa Institute, the Oriental Institute, the Far East Institute and, increasingly important, the Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada. The exact role of the research institutes in the making of Soviet foreign policy and their relationship to the ID has been the subject of some question among western observers. The institutes provided research and probably some policy recommendations to the ID, with whom they had a quite close relationship. A number of institute officials and researchers assumed positions in the ID, which itself employed consultants from the institutes as well as, apparently, commissioning research and organizing joint work with them. Some of the heads of the more influential institutes, IMEMO and the USA Institute, achieved party positions as members or candidate members of the Central Committee.

The making of policy with regard to the Middle East was ultimately the task of the party and the final decision-making in the Politburo. It has been far from clear, however, just who in the upper echelons of the party played a particular role with regard to the Middle East. Molotov apparently played a central role regarding policy for the region under Stalin, along with Y. A. Zhdanov in the immediate post-World War Two period. Khrushchev even consulted Molotov at the beginning of the Soviet involvement in Egypt, despite the fact that D. T. Shepilov was then, briefly, Foreign Minister. *Ex officio* the head of the ID, namely Ponomarev, and Gromyko as Foreign Minister even prior to joining the Politburo in 1973, were the most directly involved. Ponomarev and Suslov figured in contacts with Middle Eastern Communists, the former also dealing with national liberation movements. Podgorny and Kosygin were also directly involved in meetings and contacts as well as decision-making together with Brezhnev. As Defence Minister Grechko was deeply involved, but his successor Ustinov appeared to play a less direct role. Naval commander Gorshkov played a larger role in policy decisions in this region, apparently, than other military figures with the possible exception of air force commander Kutakhov.

Policy proposals conveyed by Ponomarev presumably originated within the Middle Eastern section of the ID, under the supervision of the deputy head in charge of Third World affairs. During much of the Brezhnev period this deputy head was Rostislav Ul’ianovskii, who came from a research institute and dealt with theoretical issues. His
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successor, Karen Brutents, had particular responsibility for the Middle East. The Foreign Ministry appears to have had a great deal of input, with Middle Eastern section head Poliakov serving as a major negotiator though not a policy-maker. Evgenii Primakov was the senior Soviet Middle East specialist. First as deputy director of IMEMO and then as head of the Oriental Institute, Primakov appears to have been a primary spokesman for the regime’s policies on the region in the 1970s and onward. He may have had some input into decision-making, at least as an adviser, even in the pre-Gorbachev period.

Soviet Interests in the Middle East

Decision-making as well as the policy proposals or even personal preferences of those involved were determined by a number of factors. These included, as was the case with every state, traditional, strategic, military, economic and political interests. For the Soviet Union, ideological interests were also relevant if not central, while domestic public opinion presumably played a smaller role than in Western countries, for example. Differences of opinion, even in the form of what could be interpreted as bureaucratic politics or pressures may also have played a role, at least in the Brezhnev era if not earlier. Yet the relative importance of most of these factors, as we shall see, varied over the years, from one Soviet leader to the next and within changing perceptions of East-West relations and the Third World.

The Soviet Union has had a number of traditional interests in the Middle East, which even predate the Soviet era. The first of these is the natural interest in a region to the south of its borders, be it on the borders of the Russian Empire or of the Soviet Union. It has always been in Russian interests to maintain stable and friendly relations with the nations on its border. And this, at times, was perceived as achievable only through the extension of Russian influence, even control, of the border areas or nations bordering Russia. Minimally, this was an interest in preventing the domination or presence of hostile forces on or near the border. A more specific traditional interest has been the concern for access to and from the Mediterranean Sea via the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. These Turkish Straits constitute the exit route for Russian shipping – commercial or military – from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and westward to the Atlantic or southeasterly through the Suez Canal en route to Asia (including the Russian Far East). Given Russia’s lack of warm water ports, this access route to the Mediterranean is particularly important. The Turkish
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Straits constitute the entry point as well as exit for ships plying the Black Sea. Thus control of this waterway has had great significance for preventing the entry of a foreign, possibly hostile fleet into the Black Sea. These traditional, basically defensive interests in the area were frequently augmented by great power aspirations which sought influence not only for the purpose of preventing a military threat but also to expand power in competition with other countries.

Under Stalin, the pursuit of these interests was determined by the prominence of ideological factors in Soviet foreign policy. In this region as well as other areas adjacent to the Soviet Union, Stalin’s post-World War Two policy sought not only to weaken the power of the West, namely Britain, but also to lay the groundwork for what he perceived as the inevitable battle between the Soviet Union and its wartime allies, that is, the ultimate conflict between the Communist world and the capitalist world. His was a bi-polar view of the world, enunciated by Zhdanov at the founding of the Comintern in September 1947 as a two-camp theory. In this view, a country was either socialist or capitalist; the only way to deal with the latter was to work towards its overthrow, that is, preparation for revolution. It was a relatively cautious policy inasmuch as the Soviet Union was economically and militarily inferior to the West. It was also a policy based on a continental military doctrine, disdaining action beyond the Asian and European continents and limiting involvement to the periphery of the Soviet Union. It was, however, mainly the ideological aspect of this policy which led to a period of relative inaction in the Third World, beyond initial efforts in the border states of Turkey and Iran. It barred cooperation with any but socialist regimes and Marxist forces, with only rare, temporary exceptions in the interests of evicting the British (for example, from India or Palestine).

Soviet entry into the Third World began with the death of Stalin in 1953 and the abandonment of the two-camp theory. There have been claims that Stalin himself was contemplating such a change; there was talk at the 1952 CPSU Congress of the need to exploit divisions within the capitalist world – a euphemism from the days of Lenin for cooperating with capitalist states, ostensibly in order to divide them. Whatever Stalin’s intentions, the change came only after his death, with the rise to power first of Malenkov and then of Khrushchev. Instead of the two-camp approach, peaceful coexistence was introduced. Without abandoning the competition between capitalism and communism, and the belief in the ultimate victory of socialism, peaceful coexistence shifted this competition to less provocative, less
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doctrinaire, and more pragmatic means. Born of the concerns generated by an appreciation of the catastrophic nature of nuclear weapons, the new foreign policy was to reduce tensions and the possibility of war, in the belief that wars would inevitably escalate to global nuclear war.

This had a number of ramifications for the Third World. If direct East–West confrontation were to be ruled out, the scene of the competition was to be elsewhere or indirect, that is, a competition for the Third World. At the same time, because of the dangers inherent in war, even this competition was to be peaceful, that is, in the form of economic, political and ideological but not armed competition. Therefore, rather than the both dangerous and often self-defeating demand for an all or nothing commitment from the new states of the Third World or the national liberation forces active there, Moscow was satisfied with the more modest but potentially positive stance of Third World non-alignment. This was in effect recognition of the possibility of a third road, by far less demanding and less dangerous.

At the same time, Third World non-alignment or neutrality had positive aspects for the Soviet Union. Neutrality meant in fact the refusal to join in alliances with a great power and refusal to grant military rights and bases. At that point in time, it was the West rather than the Soviet Union which was seeking overseas bases and the creation of a network of regional alliances. Moreover, non-alignment generally implied independence from the former imperialist colonial rulers, and again it was the West, not the Soviet Union, which was perceived as imperialist in most of the Third World. Thus, encouragement of non-alignment was virtually encouragement of an anti-western policy and, therefore, served the Soviet interest of reducing western power and influence.

Recognition of the value of non-aligned, less than socialist regimes in the competition with the West carried with it the idea of cooperation with the new, usually bourgeois nationalist, sometimes even military, regimes of the Third World. To accommodate this ideologically, there was a return to the Leninist approach to what in Marxist-Leninist terms had been called the backward nations. In such countries, where the proletariat was small or non-existent, forces could be joined with the nationalists, that is, the national bourgeoisie. As a first step it was necessary to join in their anti-imperialist, national democratic revolution, and then lead them onward, to the next step, that of proletarian socialist revolution. This basic idea, or tactic, underwent numerous interpretations and refinements over the years (discussed below in