

CONFIDENTIAL
FM MOSCOW
TO IMMEDIATE FCO
TELNO 0008
OF 021546Z JANUARY 91
AND TO IMMEDIATE WASHINGTON, UKDEL NATO, UKMIS NEW YORK,
AND TO IMMEDIATE E C POSTS, BAGHDAD, PEKING

THE GULF AND SOVIET DOMESTIC POLITICS

1. I WAS STRUCK BY THE REMARK WHICH YOU MADE TO BAKER IN YOUR RECENT CONVERSATION (FCO TELNO 2237 TO WASHINGTON) ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT SOVIET HARDLINERS MIGHT USE HOSTILITIES IN THE GULF AS A COVER FOR A CRACK-DOWN ON ONE OF THEIR SOVIET REPUBLICS. THE ITALIAN AMBASSADOR TELLS ME THAT, AFTER SEEING A NUMBER OF SENIOR SOVIET OFFICIALS (INCLUDING GORBACHEV'S DIPLOMATIC ADVISER, CHERNYAEV) ON A RECENT VISIT, THE HEAD OF THE INTERNATIONAL DEPARTMENT OF THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST PARTY HAD COME AWAY WITH A SIMILAR IMPRESSION.

2. ALTHOUGH SOME DRAW AN ANALOGY WITH THE 1956 CRISES IN SUEZ AND HUNGARY, THE SITUATION TODAY IS OF COURSE WHOLLY DIFFERENT. ACTION IN THE GULF WOULD BE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS TO WHICH THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT IS AN ENTIRELY WILLING PARTY. GORBACHEV REPEATED THE SOVIET COMMITMENT IN HIS NEW YEAR EXCHANGE WITH PRESIDENT BUSH. THERE IS NO WAY THAT THE SOVIETS COULD HOPE THAT A MILITARY CRACK-DOWN IN A REPUBLIC WOULD BE REGARDED BY WORLD OPINION AS THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF FORCE USED IN THE GULF. NOR CAN THEY LOGICALLY DELUDE THEMSELVES WITH THE THOUGHT THAT THE WEST WOULD BE TOO PREOCCUPIED WITH A GULF WAR TO NOTICE OR TO CONDEMN UNACCEPTABLE ACTION IN A SOVIET REPUBLIC.

3. BUT LOGIC AND EMOTION DO NOT NECESSARILY GO TOGETHER. AT THE TIME OF THE AMERICAN ACTION IN PANAMA, OFFICIALS IN THE FOREIGN MINISTRY HERE REMARKED THAT GORBACHEV'S PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO THE NON-USE OF FORCE IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS LOOKED A BIT ONE-SIDED. SOVIET HARDLINERS RESENTED THE APPARENT IMPLICATION THAT THE AMERICANS WERE STILL ABLE TO USE FORCE WORLDWIDE WHILE THE SOVIET UNION WAS NO LONGER IN A POSITION TO DO SO. SUCH EMOTIONS COULD DISTORT THE POLICY MAKING PROCESS.

4. MORE DIRECTLY RELEVANT MAY BE PRESSURE ON GORBACHEV FROM THE HARDLINERS, BUT PERHAPS NO LONGER ONLY FROM THEM, TO USE FORCE IF NECESSARY IN ORDER TO PRESERVE THE CONSTITUTION AND THE UNITY OF THE

STATE FOR WHICH THAT CONSTITUTION STILL PROVIDES. THIS IS AN ARGUMENT WHICH, AT LEAST IN PRINCIPLE, IS NOT EASY FOR EVEN A LIBERAL TO REFUTE.

5. IN PRACTICE, GORBACHEV HAS ALREADY SHOWN HIS WILLINGNESS TO USE FORCE TO QUELL INTER-ETHNIC VIOLENCE (BAKU). HE HAS ALSO SAID, ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION OVER THE LAST TWELVE MONTHS, THAT HE WOULD IF NECESSARY ACT DECISIVELY TO PRESERVE THE CONSTITUTION. AT THE SAME TIME HOWEVER HE HAS AVOIDED THE CRUNCH WHEREVER HE COULD, ESPECIALLY IN SITUATIONS WHICH HE CANNOT WIN, EG THE DISPUTES WITH THE RSFSR AND THE UKRAINE. BUT PARTICULARLY IN LATVIA, THE SOVIET UNION HAS A LARGE NUMBER OF IMPORTANT MILITARY ASSETS, AND A VERY SUBSTANTIAL RUSSIAN MINORITY POPULATION. THERE ARE DOUBTLESS INFLUENTIAL PARTS OF THE ARMED FORCES WHO BELIEVE THAT LATVIA WOULD BE A GOOD PLACE TO BEGIN THE REASSERTION OF CENTRAL AUTHORITY. IT IS DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE THAT THE BOMB EXPLOSIONS IN RIGA OVER THE LAST FEW WEEKS ARE NOT A DELIBERATE PROVOCATION.

6. BUT GORBACHEV MUST BE AS AWARE AS ANYONE OF THE VERY CONSIDERABLE INTERNATIONAL DISADVANTAGES OF FORCIBLE ACTION IN THE BALTIC STATES. HENCE NO DOUBT THE SWITCH OF ATTENTION TWO WEEKS AGO TO MOLDOVA. THE MOLDAVAN LEADERSHIP HAS CERTAINLY FALLEN INTO THE HANDS OF EXTREMISTS. AND THE LOCAL RUSSIAN MINORITY HAS ALSO ACTED PROVOCATIVELY. A CLAMPDOWN IN MOLDOVA WOULD HAVE THE MERIT, FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE NON-SLAV PEOPLES OF THE USSR, OF APPEARING TO TREAT RUSSIANS AND NON-RUSSIANS EVEN-HANDEDLY. IT MIGHT ALSO AROUSE LESS HOSTILE INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS. EITHER WAY ACTION THERE MIGHT HAVE SEEMED TO GORBACHEV TO BE A GOOD TRIAL RUN FOR ACTION ELSEWHERE.

7. PERHAPS BECAUSE THEY UNDERSTAND THIS, THE MOLDOVAN LEADERSHIP HAVE ALREADY CONCEDED A GOOD DEAL TO THE CENTRE. THE LITHUANIANS TOO HAVE SHOWN FLEXIBILITY. THIS COULD GIVE GORBACHEV THE OPPORTUNITY TO CONTINUE HIS TACTIC OF PROCRASTINATION AND OBFUSCATION, AND TO ARGUE TO HIS HARDLINERS THAT NOW IS THEREFORE NOT THE MOMENT TO USE FORCE.

8. I CONCLUDE THAT, WHILE SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL LINK MAY EXIST IN THE MINDS OF CERTAIN SOVIET POLITICIANS BETWEEN VOILENCE IN THE GULF AND VIOLENCE IN THE REPUBLICS, THIS IS UNLIKELY TO BE A STRONG MOTIVE AND SHOULD NOT LEAD US TO EXPECT A SOVIET CRACKDOWN DELIBERATELY TIMED TO COINCIDE WITH HOSTILITIES IN THE GULF. MORE GENERALLY, IT LOOKS AS THOUGH GORBACHEV SHOULD STILL BE ABLE TO CONTINUE HIS TACTIC OF

MANEOUVRING THE REPUBLICS TOWARDS A NEGOTIATION ON A UNION TREATY, WHILE OF COURSE NOT RULING OUT THE USE OF FORCE, ESPECIALLY IN SITUATIONS WHERE THE SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION OF ETHNIC VILENCE MAKES THIS UNDERSTANDABLE TO DOMESTIC AND WORLD OPINION.

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