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# Suez and the Soviets

By Shlomo Slonim

*On 14 October 1973, as an astonished world saw Israeli forces in apparent disarray and the Egyptian flag being implanted all along the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, the Soviet Union had every reason to urge Egypt to accept an immediate cease-fire.*

In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War attention has once again become focused on the strategic implications of the reopening of the Suez Canal.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the conflict, however, the view was commonly held that the Suez Canal no longer had a vital role to play in international trade or military strategy.<sup>2</sup> This belief was premised, inter alia, on the inability of the Canal to accommodate the larger type of tanker increasingly in use, the minimal additional cost which the trip around the Cape of Good Hope added to a barrel of oil reaching Europe, and the vulnerability of the Canal to dislocation and destruction. Even absent any recourse to atomic weapons, the Canal, twice in just over a decade, had been put out of action; in an age of ICBMs bearing nuclear warheads the Canal's strategic advantage, it was argued, was but a myth. And lacking any major strategic or economic significance, the Canal, it was thought, had permanently lost its attraction as a focus of superpower rivalry.

The end of the Yom Kippur War and the projected reopening of the Canal did much to lay the previously held axioms to rest. But while the strategic importance of the Canal was now generally seen as one of the consequences of the war, its role as a motivating factor of superpower conduct prior to, and during, the hostilities was less readily perceived. Yet, an analysis of events during the Yom Kippur War lends considerable plausibility to the thesis that the Canal was a major

(or possibly even the principal) goal of the Soviets in the recent conflict, and correspondingly a major focus of American countermoves, in particular the worldwide alert of U. S. armed forces on 24 October 1973.

The Soviet attitude toward the Canal helps to explain the backing of the Soviet Union for the initiation of hostilities in October 1973, despite the deterioration of relations between Egypt and the Soviet Union in the course of the preceding year. In July 1972, it will be recalled, Sadat had quite unceremoniously ordered the Russians out of Egypt—precisely, it would seem, because of Russian reluctance to endorse President Anwar Sadat's war plans which called for a cross-Canal attack against the Israelis.<sup>3</sup> The Russians, Sadat had charged, preferred detente with the United States over Egyptian interests and were, therefore, unprepared to underwrite an activist military policy. And yet, in October 1973, the Russians were apparently prepared to go all-out in readying the Egyptian-Syrian war machine and to keep it in good supply once the attack was launched. (There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Soviets were not only privy to the timing of the attack—as witness the timely evacuation of diplomatic and other personnel from Cairo—but were also in on the advance planning, thus enabling an immediate vast airlift of supplies and weapons and the pre-shipment of heavier equipment by sea to Egypt and Syria.)<sup>4</sup> Granted that the absence of Soviet troops in Egypt and the concomitant lessening of the danger of a direct confrontation with the United States reduced Soviet opposition to the unleashing of war, the question, nonetheless, remains: What positive goal did the Russians expect to achieve by their unreserved and active support for the hostilities? The answer, it is submitted, can best be ascertained by reference to the special place of the Canal in Soviet strategic thinking.

Western analysts<sup>5</sup> have singularly failed to take account of the importance which Soviet strategy has for the past two decades increasingly attached to the Suez Canal. For years now, geopolitical interpretations of

<sup>1</sup>For footnotes, please turn to page 41.

Soviet strategy have taken it for granted that the Dardanelles constitute the only international waterway with which Soviet policy is really deeply concerned. This estimate of Soviet interests, it is submitted, was not valid for the 1950s and is certainly not true for the 1960s and 1970s. The changeover in Soviet naval strategy from defensive to offensive capacity, a fact attested to by the extraordinary increase in both the number and diversification of Soviet ships, not to speak of their modernization, portended that the Soviet Union would no longer be content simply with a measure of control over the gateway nearest home.<sup>6</sup> Soviet strategy called for control of, or at least influence over, the access gates leading to the world's oceans; preeminently, this meant the Suez Canal. Only a sound appreciation of the part which the Suez Canal has come to play in the hierarchy of Soviet interests affords a proper understanding of Russian policy towards Egypt since 1955.

In that year, after British forces had been withdrawn from the Canal Zone, the Soviet Union made its first arms deal with Egypt. Nasser's aims were quite clear—war with Israel. There is, however, no evidence that this was the Soviet goal. Its aims seem to have been entirely different—namely, shoring up Egypt's defenses against a possible restoration of Western control of the Canal. For the Soviet Union, Egyptian independence was important, perhaps not so much for its own intrinsic value, but as a means of ensuring that the Canal never again fell under Western domination. The Soviet Union was staking its claim in the Middle East by precluding henceforth exclusive Western control of the vital waterway which linked it, the Soviet Union, with East Africa and Asia. The 1956 Suez War and Khrushchev's threats to rain rockets on England and France in the event that the latter persisted in their attempt to seize the Canal demonstrated the vital importance which the Soviet Union now attached to ensuring the "neutralization" of the Suez Canal—free of exclusive Western control. Moscow's ambitions with regard to the Canal became abundantly clear when the Soviet leaders called for joint Soviet-American action "to put an end to the aggression."<sup>7</sup> In effect, this amounted to a call for a Soviet-American condominium to dominate the Canal in lieu of the British-French effort. President Eisenhower quickly disabused the Kremlin leaders of any illusions they may have harbored regarding possible introduction of Soviet forces into Egypt. He termed their suggestion "unthinkable" and warned that the United States would be duty-bound "to oppose any such effort." Nonetheless, the Soviet move achieved its negative purpose. In a very real sense, that episode extended the Brezhnev doctrine to the Canal even before Brezhnev was in power and had had occasion

to enunciate his famous "protective" thesis in relation to areas deemed vital to the security of the Soviet Union.

The 1956 "settlement," which introduced U.N. expeditionary forces into Sinai, represented an agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States to keep "hands off" the Canal. This policy of mutual restraint led to a standstill in the critical area of the Canal for some 10 years, but did not prevent the outbreak of skirmishes on the fringes—in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, etc.

The 1967 Six-Day War returned the focus to the Suez Canal, but the speed with which the Israelis captured its east bank prevented any Russian move to intervene. The new situation resulting from the fighting, with Israelis on one side of the Canal and Egyptians on the other, produced a new form of "neutralization" of the waterway—namely its non-use. For the Russians, this development had its good and its bad points. On the one hand, the Canal was not in operation under Western control; but, on the other hand, closure of the Canal meant that Russian shipping to East Africa and Asia (and, in particular, North Vietnam), had to journey some 9,000 miles or more around the Cape, and, of course, the lines of naval communication between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian and Pacific Oceans were critically disrupted. Little wonder, then, that Soviet proposals for peace in the Middle East laid stress upon an early reopening of the Canal. Thus a Soviet plan submitted to the United States in late 1968 listed the reopening of the waterway as one of the first steps in a proposed settlement.<sup>8</sup> But if in 1968 a revived Canal was a desideratum for the Soviet Union, by 1973 it had become a matter of the utmost importance.<sup>9</sup> Various events in the intervening years had heightened the essentiality of the Canal for Soviet strategy, even to the point where its forceful reopening by proxy was apparently worth the gamble of impairing the détente which had emerged between East and West during recent years.

By the late 1960s the rivalry and tension which had progressively marked Sino-Soviet affairs had broken out into open fighting on the Ussuri and Amur Rivers in Siberia. In June 1969, Communist Party Secretary Brezhnev unabashedly called for an Asian Security Treaty to "guard" the peace in Asia. This policy of containing China led the Soviet Union in August 1971 to conclude a 15-year Friendship Treaty with India, thus placing the two giant Communist powers on opposite sides in South Asia's rivalry between India and Pakistan. With the outbreak of war between the latter two states in December 1971, the Soviet alignment protected India from any possible Chinese or U. S. reaction. Beyond giving the Soviet Union a commanding



UPI PHOTO

*Their three-day Cairo talks ended, Sadat said goodbye to Kosygin—who said goodbye to Soviet hopes for a cease-fire.*

position in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, the Indian victory added fresh impetus to the Soviet drive southward toward the Persian Gulf. This thrust southward was given formal expression in the Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship concluded in April 1972. Soviet strategy henceforth called for short, secure and open lines of communication between the Black Sea and the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. This, in turn, meant the reopening of the Suez Canal—and, if possible, its reopening under some sort of Russian auspices. For the Russians, the Canal had become no less valuable an instrument of policy than it had been for Disraeli in 1874 and as it was to remain for succeeding British governments for three generations.<sup>10</sup>

This backdrop provides the key to an understanding of Russia's moves on the eve of, and during, the Yom Kippur War. An overt Russian move against the Canal was, of course, ruled out. Even the stationing of Russian troops in Egypt in 1970 had produced a hardening of the American position in support of Israel and had led to the suspension of the Rogers Plan which had proposed a near-total Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai and other conquered territories. A Russian attempt to actually occupy the Canal would have been met by an instant American response. But Sadat's decision to go to war offered the Soviet Union an excellent opportunity to reassert its authority in Egypt and the Middle East generally, and, above all, to gain a controlling hand over a reopened Suez Canal. Soviet strategists might not unreasonably have reckoned that Egypt could possibly break through the Israeli defenses and seize a strip of territory immediately adjoining the Canal. This would momentarily ensure Egyptian control of both sides of the Canal and make possible, at least in theory, the reopening of the waterway. At this point, before Israeli forces had a chance to regroup and shatter this vision, the Soviet Union could step in and call for an immediate cease-fire along the then-held positions. In effect, the Israelis would be held back by the diplomatic intervention of the Soviet Union, bolstered by the threat of more forceful intervention, if necessary. The reopening of the Suez Canal would thus be made feasible under the protective umbrella of the Soviet Union.

This scenario is very close to what actually transpired

in the early stages of the Yom Kippur War. On Saturday, 14 October, a week after the fighting had begun, when it appeared that Egypt had indeed gained full control of both banks of the Canal, reports began circulating in European capitals that Russian and Egyptian experts would shortly undertake a survey of the Canal with a view to its early reopening.<sup>11</sup> Two days later, on 16 October, Premier Kosygin arrived in Cairo, for the purpose, according to most sources, of convincing Sadat to accept a cease-fire. The present lines satisfied the Russian aims perfectly—an Egyptian reopening of the Canal under the protective eye of the Soviet Union without danger, at this point, of any direct Soviet-U. S. confrontation. Sadat, however, was apparently quite opposed to an immediate cease-fire. His aims were Sharm-El-Shaikh and the entire Sinai peninsula, if not the actual conquest of Israel, and now, when his armies had scored such impressive victories, he was in no mood to accept limited gains merely to please the Russians.<sup>12</sup> Kosygin spent three days in the Egyptian capital in a vain attempt to persuade Sadat that an immediate cease-fire was in his own interest, before the Israelis launched major counterattacks and before the United States became involved. Sadat, however, remained adamant, and the Soviet Prime Minister returned to Moscow empty-handed. Russian hopes were now staked on the outcome of the military conflict.

But even as Kosygin was in Cairo, a dramatic new development had taken place on the military front which gave Israel the initiative and threatened to turn the tables on the Russians with regard to control of the Canal. On 16 October, Israeli forces under General Arik Sharon had crossed the Canal and had begun a process of cutting off the Egyptian forces on the east bank from their sources of supply. By the end of that week, 20 October, the Israeli forces had scored significant gains and were making deep inroads into Egypt proper in both northerly and southerly directions. There was a possibility that the Israelis, instead of being dislodged from the Canal Zone, would be in a position shortly to control both sides of the Canal and reopen it under their own auspices, or possibly those of the Americans. The Soviet gamble on control of the Canal was on the verge of boomeranging and producing precisely what the Russians feared most—Western control of that vital waterway, with all that this implied for Russian strategy and the position of the Soviet Union in the Middle East.

The Soviet reaction was not slow in coming. On Saturday, 20 October, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was urgently requested to come to Moscow for purposes of instituting a cease-fire in the Middle East lest the Russians take a step "from which there would be no return." Kissinger arrived in Moscow the same

day, and the cease-fire proposal, to be submitted to the Security Council, was hammered out in the course of the next 36 hours.

The Security Council was called into session early on Monday morning and adopted Resolution 338 which called for the cease-fire to enter into force at 1700, G.M.T., on Monday, 22 October. Fighting, however, continued on Tuesday, and the Israelis proceeded to consolidate their gains on the west bank and confirmed that the city of Suez and the entire Egyptian Third Army on the east bank were hermetically sealed off from contact with Cairo. In effect, this meant that the Israeli forces were within grasp of becoming masters of the Canal. If the Israelis moved as quickly northward as they had southward, they would be in control of the Canal from Port Said to Suez in a matter of days, if not hours.

The Soviet leaders were determined to prevent any such eventuality. On Wednesday, 24 October, they issued a call to the Americans to join them in a combined expeditionary force to separate the combatants and ensure observance of the cease-fire. In effect, the Russians were once again proposing joint Russian-American control of the Canal. The Americans, however, were no more prepared to enter into any such partnership in 1973 than they had been in 1956. They were totally opposed to the introduction of Russian forces into the area "in whatever guise." The American attitude was summed up by Secretary Kissinger as follows: "It is inconceivable that we should transplant the great power rivalry into the Middle East, or alternatively, that we should impose a military condominium by the United States and the Soviet Union."<sup>13</sup>

Undeterred by this reaction, the Russians indicated on the night of 24 October that they were contemplating unilaterally sending Russian forces to the Middle East, "to ensure observance of the cease-fire." The Kremlin leaders were apparently so concerned about possible Israeli moves that they were willing to risk a showdown with the United States in order to prevent the Canal from falling under Israeli control.<sup>14</sup> The U. S. response was immediate and dramatic. The same night, President Nixon ordered a worldwide alert of U. S. military forces for "precautionary" reasons. As Secretary Kissinger explained, although the United States was intent on avoiding a confrontation with the Soviet Union, "there are limits beyond which we cannot go. . . . We will oppose the attempt by any country to achieve a position of predominance, either globally or regionally." The United States thus confirmed that its concern over the "neutral" operation of the Canal was no less acute than that of the Russians—only the desired "neutrality" could not be secured by great power involvement, whether joint or unilateral, but by

mutual restraint. At the same time, with the intention, apparently, of reassuring the Soviets of the absence of any American designs to dominate the Canal, Secretary Kissinger declared that "the Soviet Union is not threatened in any of its legitimate positions in the Middle East." The American assurances, which undoubtedly affirmed earlier private guarantees, seem to have satisfied the Soviet Union, and the crisis subsided when the Soviet delegate to the Security Council, on Thursday, 25 October, endorsed the draft proposal of the non-aligned States for the creation of a U.N. expeditionary force not containing elements from any of the permanent members of the Council. By this time word had reached the U.N. that the Israelis had halted their advance and that the cease-fire was holding.

The foregoing analysis also affords a fresh perspective on the disengagement arrangements instituted between Egypt and Israel during February–March. For if the Yom Kippur War confirmed the continuing strategic importance of the Canal as a focus of great-power rivalry, then Israeli withdrawal from the banks of the Canal may be justly regarded as an attempt to isolate the regional conflict from the global superpower competition over control of the waterway. In short, Israel hoped that by this move it was eliminating any occasion for direct Russian intervention in the Middle East conflict. As Secretary Kissinger said, a reopening of the Canal "is the best way to reduce Soviet influence, and for that matter any outside influence, in that area."<sup>15</sup>

Israel's willingness to abandon forward positions at the Canal accorded with a stand long held by many of Israel's leaders, and particularly by Moshe Dayan. The Canal, in Dayan's eyes, is a reserve of the great powers and Israel has nothing to gain and much to lose by entering upon that reserve.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in 1956, when General Dayan was in command of the Israeli troops which conquered Sinai, Israel made it quite clear that it was not interested in advancing beyond the Mitla and Gidi Passes, i.e., a distance of some 20 miles from the Canal. The issue of control of the Canal was left to be decided by the powers that be, i.e., initially France and the United Kingdom, and subsequently, the United States and the Soviet Union. Similarly, in 1967 it was reliably reported that Dayan, then Minister of Defense, was opposed to an Israeli advance up to the Canal. Rather, he favored a halt at approximately the same positions which had been taken in 1956. But the forward sweep of Israel's armor brought it right up to the shores of the Canal and it was then too late to reverse the tide of events. Nonetheless, in 1970–71 Dayan once again reverted to the idea of an Israeli withdrawal from the immediate vicinity of the Canal in the framework of a partial settlement. Nothing came of this scheme, however, even when the idea was taken

up by Secretary of State Rogers in 1971–72 as part of his planned “proximity” talks on an interim settlement between Israel and Egypt. It was only in the aftermath of the October fighting, when preservation of the cease-fire necessitated separating the combatants, that a broader scheme for detaching the Canal from the sphere of the Arab-Israeli conflict became realizable.

The disengagement arrangements, since they were linked to a form of “neutralization” of a revived Canal, proved satisfactory, not only to the immediate parties to the conflict, but also to the superpowers whose conduct in the Yom Kippur War demonstrated afresh that they regarded the issue of the disposition of the

Canal as a matter directly affecting their vital interests. It remains to be seen, however, whether this effort to divorce global rivalry from regional tension will prove adequate and successful.

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<sup>1</sup>Thus the United States has moved to counteract the expected increase in Soviet penetration of the Indian Ocean by activating its agreement with the United Kingdom on the development of the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia as a defense outpost. And Senator Henry Jackson (D. Wash.) has called for demilitarization of the Canal by closing it to the warships of all outside powers, including the naval vessels of the United States and Soviet Union. The strategic impact of a reopening of the Canal is analyzed by Admiral Worth H. Bagley, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Naval Forces, Europe, in an interview in *U.S. News and World Report*, 24 Dec. 1973.

<sup>2</sup>See C. L. Sulzberger, “The Declining Importance of the Suez Canal in International Affairs,” *The New York Times*, 16 Nov. 1969; and D. C. Watt, “The Suez Canal: No Commercial Future,” *New Middle East*, Jan. 1969.

<sup>3</sup>See Walter Laqueur, “On the Soviet Departure from Egypt,” *Commentary*, Dec. 1972; and Jon Kimche, “Why the Russians left Egypt,” *Midstream*, Nov. 1972.

<sup>4</sup>See *Insight on the Middle East War* (London: André Deutsch, 1974), p. 133. See also address by Moshe Dayan, reported in *Jerusalem Post*, 12 Mar. 1974.

<sup>5</sup>See, in this regard, John C. Campbell, *Defense of the Middle East: Problems of American Policy* (rev. ed.) (N.Y.: Harper, 1960); Robert E. Hunter, “The Soviet Dilemma in the Middle East,” *Adelphi Papers*, Nos. 59 and 60, Sept., Oct., 1969; the relevant essays in J. C. Hurewitz (ed.), *Soviet-American Rivalry in the Middle East* (N.Y.: Academy of Political Science, 1969); and Paul Y. Hammond and Sydney S. Alexander, *Political Dynamics in the Middle East* (N.Y.: Elsevier, 1972). But cf. Aaron S. Klieman, *Soviet Russia and the Middle East* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins, 1970), p. 54.

<sup>6</sup>See in this regard Michael McGwire (ed.), *Soviet Naval Developments: Context and Capability* (N.Y.: Praeger, 1973); and McGwire, “Soviet Naval Programmes,” *Survival*, Sept./Oct. 1973, pp. 218–27.

<sup>7</sup>See text of Bulganin message to President Eisenhower and the latter’s reply in *The New York Times*, 6 Nov. 1956.

<sup>8</sup>See text of Soviet Proposal on the Middle East of 30 Dec. 1968, as published in *The New York Times*, 11 Jan. 1969. It was even reported that the Soviet Union was intent on incorporating a specific clause on the reopening of the Canal in a proposed new Security Council resolution. See Drew Middleton, *ibid.*, 8 Jan. 1969. See also the article by Robert Kleiman, *ibid.*, 20 Jan. 1969.

<sup>9</sup>In this regard, see Yevgeny Primakov, “Why the Canal Must Be Reopened: A Soviet View,” *New Middle East*, July 1972, pp. 7–8.

<sup>10</sup>Russian security policy seems, in other respects too, to be paralleling

former British imperial policy. By means of “friendship” treaties with Egypt (signed in May 1971), India and Iraq, the Russians were now tied to three former centers of British imperial power in Asia and Africa. As Bernard Lewis presciently noted: “Not only in the Middle East but also—indeed far more—in the Indian subcontinent, Russia is rehearsing the role formerly played by Britain in the age of imperial expansion.” “Russia in the Middle East,” *Round Table*, July 1970, p. 262.

<sup>11</sup>See the report of Victor Louis in the London daily paper, the *Evening News*. As is well known, Louis, a Soviet citizen resident in Moscow, frequently serves as a convenient conduit for the Kremlin in publicizing news items it wishes to bring to the attention of the West.

<sup>12</sup>Other considerations may have also figured in Sadat’s rejection of an immediate cease-fire followed by a reopening of the Canal. With the Canal open, Soviet policymakers, he might have figured, would lack any real incentive to support Egypt’s insistent demands for a return of all Arab territories. For this reason, among others, Egypt and Israel in 1971 had been unable to come to terms on the withdrawal of forces and a reopening of the Canal under the so-called “interim agreement” proposed by Secretary of State Rogers. See George E. Gruen, “The United States, Israel and the Middle East,” *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1972, pp. 172–173.

<sup>13</sup>Transcript of news conference of 25 Oct. 1973.

<sup>14</sup>Soviet moves were no doubt also influenced by the possible consequences of another Arab defeat as disastrous as that which they had suffered in 1967. Such a development would have seriously jeopardized Soviet prestige and standing in the Arab world and, in fact, might have endangered all the advances made by Russia in penetrating the Middle East over the years. All this, however, does not detract from the basic thesis presented herein, that only a direct, substantive, and material interest of the Soviet Union itself, such as the issue of control over the Suez Canal, would have been sufficient to galvanize the Russians into taking as drastic a step as they did, fraught with the danger of a nuclear confrontation with the United States—the bane of Soviet policymakers throughout the nuclear age.

<sup>15</sup>Transcript of Press Conference, 21 Nov. 1973.

It is no secret that Israel regards the matter of the reopening of the Canal and the rehabilitation of the cities along the shoreline as a crucial test of Egypt’s intentions. Clearly, the idea is to give Egypt a vital stake in the maintenance of peace. Additionally, however, the Canal-in-operation would reduce both the risk of involvement by the superpowers and their tolerance of a further round of Arab-Israeli hostilities.

<sup>16</sup>For an interesting review of Dayan’s views on the Canal see the article by Moshe Zack, “Dayan: From Suez to Suez,” *Ma’ariv*, 22 Feb. 1974. (In Hebrew).