

WWS Case Study 1/98

Negotiating Coalition:
Winning Soviet Consent to
Resolution 678 Against Iraq

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The plaque next to the painting of George Bush in the National Portrait Gallery opines that history will deem the greatest achievement of his presidency to have been assembling and maintaining the international coalition that reversed Saddam Hussein's aggression in the Persian Gulf. The phenomenal success hinged on a remarkable feat of US-Soviet cooperation in the United Nations. Newly released documents from the archives of the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee now make it possible to do a close reading of some of the key negotiations which led up to Moscow's endorsement of the use of force against Iraq.

The United States brought two especially important strengths into each one of its negotiations with the Soviet Union. The first was its willingness to contribute the lion's share of the military might needed to enforce the international community's will in the Gulf. From early on in the crisis, US leaders had the military initiative, and they protected it carefully. Secondly, very shortly after Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, the principals inside the Bush administration agreed on where they needed to go in dealing with the crisis and how to get there. They decided to escalate pressure on Saddam Hussein by stages, starting with economic sanctions and ending with military force if need be.¹ The diplomatic task would be to bind the other significant players in the international scene, especially the Soviet Union, to the endorsement of each of these steps in turn.

US negotiators framed their diplomatic tactics around this series of stepwise goals. First, they did their best to bind themselves and their allies to an increasing momentum of international resolve; each joint statement had to be firmer in its determination to reverse Iraqi aggression than the last. When requesting diplomatic cooperation at each successive step, the Americans made clear their ability to take unilateral military action in the Gulf. But they also used adversarial circumstances to dramatize the need for additional action, so that the pressure for forward movement seemed to come as much from the course of events as from their own agenda.

Second, US negotiators exploited the divisions within the Soviet leadership, first arguing their aims to Eduard Shevardnadze, Gorbachev's foreign minister, who had a comparatively

sympathetic ear for the Bush administration, and then relying upon him to help bring Gorbachev around against the advice of his Middle East specialists and his own more conservative inclinations. Third, the Americans timed and phrased their requests of the Soviets carefully, giving them advanced warning of the biggest diplomatic deadlines to allow time for political digestion and emphasizing the more palatable possible outcomes of allied decisions. Finally, at certain points during the lead-up to the Soviet vote for the use of force, the Bush administration came forward with gestures of largesse toward the Soviet Union which were not part of an explicit *quid pro quo*, but which helped coopt the Soviets into standing with their former adversary.

From the Soviet standpoint, joining the multinational effort against Iraq meant agreeing to abandon a Cold War ally in favor of the newly cooperative relationship with the West. For Gorbachev, however, the dilemma raised by the crisis went much deeper; it touched at the heart of his “new thinking,” which was of the utmost importance to him politically and personally. The element of Gorbachev’s “new thinking” that emphasized East-West cooperation toward common economic and humanitarian ends fit better with US aims and methods in the Gulf than did the other key part of his *novoe myshlenie* - namely the use of exclusively peaceful means in politics. A peaceful end to the conflict grounded in international cooperation led by the former superpower rivals would have meant an impressive vindication for Gorbachev’s own vision of the new, post-Cold War world order. In the end, Gorbachev could not accept that the military resolution of the crisis had exposed a flaw in his “new thinking.” In his memoirs, he expresses the conviction that a real chance for an equitable and peaceful solution was squandered.

During the negotiations, the divide between these aspects of Gorbachev’s ideology made room for canny US negotiators to press their aims. However, it also gave them some of their biggest headaches in the form of frantic Soviet peace initiatives which could have spelled political disaster for US strategic aims in the Middle East had they been put into practice.

Subtitle:

Only hours after Iraq invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990, the Security Council issued Resolution 660, which condemned the invasion and demanded an Iraqi withdrawal. The resolution was entirely multilateral in inspiration. The Soviet ambassador to the UN was reportedly “to the fore” in pushing for its passage, and even Cuba voted for the measure.² On the next day, US Secretary of State James Baker and the USSR’s Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze issued a joint statement condemning the invasion and inviting the international community to join them in announcing a cessation of all arms shipments to Iraq.³

Despite the fact that Iraq had been a client state of the Soviet Union’s during the Cold War, Gorbachev had good ideological reasons to advocate an international united front against Saddam. As Vladimir Nosenko notes, the Iraqi leader’s aggression was a challenge to Gorbachev’s new thinking, and if “the Soviet leadership were slow to condemn Iraqi aggression, doubts would arise as to Gorbachev’s sincerity and credibility.” It would also threaten Gorbachev’s greatest foreign policy achievement, the newly positive relationship with the US, and thereby also endanger his political position at home.⁴

The Soviet willingness to undertake declarations of international condemnation on a peaceful basis enabled the passage of several further Security Council measures imposing sanctions on Iraq (SCR 661), condemning Iraq’s formal annexation of Kuwait (SCR 662), and demanding that Iraq “permit and facilitate the immediate departure” of foreign nationals from Iraqi and Kuwaiti territory (SCR 664).

The Soviet Union found it much harder to countenance the use or display of military force in the region. (Flag place in Gorby’s memoirs on reaction to deployment of troops). In his memoirs, Baker describes the hostile reaction he initially received from Shevardnadze when informing him of the US decision to commence the “Desert Shield” operation in Saudi Arabia, which involved a planned 100,000 American troops: ““Are you *consulting* us or are you *informing* us?”⁵ Of course, the answer was the latter, but Baker dodged the question with an improvised

invitation to the Soviets to join the multilateral force. (Although at the time Baker covered his tracks by phrasing this as an “exploratory” offer, his ability to make such major gambits on a more or less spontaneous basis testifies to the importance of his huge confidence in his own personal political initiative as a source of his negotiating skill.) Shevardnadze then inquired about possibly animating the military staff committee of the Security Council, the body that was officially supposed to coordinate UN military actions. Baker promised to raise the idea with the President.⁶

Baker did call Shevardnadze back the following day with the news that the President did not object to Soviet participation in the military operation in the Gulf, but there is no indication in his account as to whether the Security Council military staff committee was raised again. The implication is, I think, that this was vetoed in the administration. In the event, the Soviets declined to participate militarily and presumably at the same time they dropped the idea of setting up the UN committee for the time being.

Had the Soviets made a sizeable contribution to the military force in the Gulf, they might have been able to obtain a greater say in the decision of when to use force; a deployment of Soviet military assets certainly would have made a demand for some version of a Security Council military staff committee more credible. However, the Soviet military was probably too impoverished to permit more than what would have been a small sideshow compared to the US buildup. It also would have run into serious opposition from much of Soviet public and official opinion.

Baker mentions the importance of memories of the USSR’s military disaster in Afghanistan in the decision not to use force.⁷ A glance at the opinions expressed in the Soviet press bears this out this judgment.⁸ In addition, suspicions of US militarism also clearly had not evaporated since the end of the Cold War. While journalistic assessments of the initial US-Soviet diplomatic response to the Iraqi invasion were positive, both in *Izvestia* and the much more conservative *Pravda*,⁹ when news of the US’s Desert Shield deployment came out, voices in the

Soviet press sounded more ambivalent both about the US's actions and about cooperating militarily with it. Writing for the generally pro-Western *Izvestia* newspaper on 10 August 1990, Melor Sturua observed that:

This isn't the first time that I have watched US military exercises in the Middle East on American television. But what gave me an unpleasant jolt was that these shots are now being shown all mixed up with shots of our ships in the region. That's not how it should be, that's all wrong!¹⁰

Drawing on this sort of sentiment, Shevardnadze's political opponents in the Soviet Union repeatedly attacked him over the possibility of Soviet participation in the international force in the Gulf. In the speech in which he announced his resignation before the same body on 20 December 1990, Shevardnadze was still defending himself against accusations from the Defense Ministry that he had a plan to send troops to the Persian Gulf.¹¹ If the Soviet hard-liners' "refusal to participate" in the coalition "damaged their credibility,"¹² as James Baker asserts in his memoirs, it certainly did not stop them from using the barest rumor of Soviet military participation as a political stick to beat Shevardnadze, the US's best ally in the Soviet administration. Anti-American opposition to Soviet military participation in the Gulf force, coupled with Gorbachev's own preference for exclusively peaceful means in settling the crisis, helped assure that the final decisions over the use of force would rest in the hands of the US administration.

Baker's spur-of-the-moment invitation to the Soviets, which was repeated by Bush in a somewhat less forward way during the Helsinki meeting on 9 September 1990,¹³ reassured the more US-friendly members of the Soviet administration that the administration did not wish to monopolize military power in the Gulf. As such, it turned out to be an absolutely costless gambit in the negotiations.

Broaching the use of force:

Security Council Resolution 665, relating to the enforcement of the embargo on Iraqi trade, was the first explicit authorization issued by the UN for the use of force by member states in

the Gulf. UN discussions of how to enforce Security Council Resolution 661 had been framed by the US and Britain's expressions of willingness to take matters into their own hands under the authority of Article 51 of the UN Charter on the right to individual or collective self-defense, which in its Anglo-Saxon invocations was beginning to look as robust and flexible in international law as the due process clause of the 14th Amendment was in American jurisprudence. The other permanent members of the Security Council argued that an additional UN resolution was needed to endorse member states' enforcement measures, and the Soviets even suggested that the Military Staff Committee be used as the means of supervising the implementation of sanctions.¹⁴

The chance to push forward this round of diplomacy came when Saddam tested the embargo imposed by SCR 661 by dispatching a series of oil tankers from Iraqi ports. Pressure was intense inside the US administration to go it alone in stopping the shipments, a move that Baker is sure would have made the Soviets withdraw from the coalition.¹⁵ Baker managed to use the threat of unilateral action and a pressing challenge to the integrity of the international effort, the latter furnished obligingly by Saddam, to force action on the issue. Baker told Shevardnadze that he could hold off unilateral action only so long as the Soviets agreed to a resolution that would permit the Iraqi challenge in future to be met with force. On August 20, Shevardnadze himself then proposed a five-day deadline within which the Soviets would rely on their diplomacy to solve the crisis. When the Iraqis rejected Soviet diplomatic demands outright, the way was paved for SCR 665.¹⁶ US negotiating tactics had helped turn an imminent threat into an impetus forward for the coalition. If Saddam had not challenged the UN blockade and unwittingly helped the US force the issue, the Americans would have had to overleap an important intermediate step between economic sanctions and authorization for a military invasion of Kuwait.

In successive meetings with the Soviets, American negotiators began working towards this next logical step. Their immediate goals in the next round of talks between the leaders - in Helsinki on 9 September 1990 - were more modest, however. In James Baker's words, the main aim was to

issue “a new joint statement ratcheting up the language of the previous communiqué.”¹⁷ The forward momentum of the international coalition had to be maintained.

While Baker and Shevardnadze were working on a joint statement together, Bush and Gorbachev met for a general discussion of bilateral issues. After opening remarks between the two during which Bush expressed his satisfaction at the demonstration of unity between the Soviet Union and the US, the two got down to business. Bush first politely acknowledged the political trouble Gorbachev had gone to in cooperating with the US on the issue. He went on to state that a joint resolution of the crisis could lead to a “new world order.” Evidently, this would have been the first that Gorbachev would have heard of the concept: Hutchings asserts that the idea was first articulated publicly (if not in precisely that wording) in the joint statement issued at the end of the conference.¹⁸ According to Hutchings’ account, the concept drew strength from the idea that the victory of democracy within states, as evidenced most dramatically in the former Warsaw Pact nations, “could inform an order *among* states which could, over time, induce more states to adhere internally to these broader norms.”¹⁹ At the time, Bush did not expand on the idea at length, perhaps out of the consideration that the concept would seem too smug about the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the victory of the US’s “Western values.” Of course, he was also keen to get down to business, and probably too modest to indulge in the sort of philosophizing which Gorbachev loved to inflict on his political interlocutors. In a way, it is a bit unfortunate that he was not more expansive about the “new world order” abstraction at the time, since it shared the scope and grandiosity, and much of the substance as well, of Gorbachev’s “new thinking,” and might have helped fire the Soviet leader’s enthusiasm for the occasion.

There was one crucial element of realism in Bush’s “new world order” (along with the emphasis, diplomatically understated on this occasion, on liberal democracy) which distinguished it from “new thinking.” Bush moved on to this point immediately: “an very definite principle must lie at the basis of this new world order. Saddam Hussein cannot be permitted to profit from his

aggression... We will not settle for failure in our efforts to achieve the goals set out by the United Nations.” This was the Churchill that went with the Wilson in Bush’s “new world order.”

After stating that he favored a peaceful resolution to the crisis, but that “Saddam Hussein must know that if he does not leave Kuwait, we are ready to resort to force,” Bush made clear his wishes for the outcome of the meeting:

“I would like our discussions of the crisis in the Persian Gulf to be deep and substantive. I hope that as a result of this discussion you will be able to say to Saddam Hussein that if in the final analysis, the countries which have troops in the region (and there are 23 of them) are required to resort to force to eliminate the consequences of Iraq’s aggression, you will support such efforts. Possibly it will be difficult for you to take such a position, however I would welcome it if you considered it possible.”

While the tone of his statement was quite tentative, Bush was taking a big step in simultaneously raising the topic of permitting force for the first time as well as requesting Gorbachev’s immediate assent. This bold move, albeit couched in unassertive language, may partly have accounted for Gorbachev’s strongly negative response. His was of raising the issue makes for an interesting contrast to Baker’s approach on the same topic.

In his opening statement, Bush also tried to counter fears and speculation then rife in the Soviet leadership and press about ulterior motives behind the US military operations in the Gulf. He repeated what had started as Baker’s impromptu offer to Shevardnadze - that Soviet troops would be welcome in the international coalition if Gorbachev wished to send them. He also reassured Gorbachev that he did not envision a permanent American military presence in the region, and said that “[i]f Saddam Hussein stays in power, then any mechanisms designed to assure against a repetition of aggression and against the possible use of nuclear weapons will be not American, but international.” This last statement was no doubt intended to reinforce Bush’s claim that there would be no long-term US troop presence in the region, but it would also have answered the worries in some Soviet quarters (which would not have gone unnoticed by Gorbachev) that the US would stop at nothing less than overthrowing Saddam.

The major initiative of the meeting, however, was Bush's promise to reverse decades of Cold War US policy to sideline the Soviet Union in the Middle East. If a new world order in which the Soviet Union would participate shoulder to shoulder with the US and its allies in promoting peace and liberal democracy around the globe really were to become a reality, the old policy would necessarily be obsolete. Baker's improvised invitation to Shevardnadze to have the Soviets join the international force in the Gulf, which by now was a standard part of the US line, had already substantially undermined the consistency of an exclusionary policy.²⁰ (In reality once the issue of including Soviet troops had been raised, as inevitably it would be at some point, the US could not have withheld its consent without vitiating the credibility of the international coalition.)

However, Bush's actual statement went further than the Baker offer in its explicitness and in its invitation to Soviet involvement throughout the region, and in particular in a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The idea was that US-Soviet cooperation would not only be a one-off event confined to the Persian Gulf for as long as the crisis lasted, but would continue afterward, across the Middle East:

“For many years, during the years of the “Cold War,” US policy consisted of the idea that the Soviet Union should not play any role in the Near East. Of course, the Soviet Union did not agree with that line and was unhappy with the US position. And while I am convinced that it would be a great victory for Saddam to link the crisis associated with his aggression to the problems of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I want to assure you: the former conception, the former approach by the USA to the participation of the Soviet Union in Near Eastern affairs has now changed. The new order, which, I hope, it will be possible to create after all these upheavals, assumes that the United States and the Soviet Union will make more positive efforts to settle not just that problem, but also the remaining problems of the Near East.”

Bush clearly intended to encourage the Soviets to drop their calls for linking the Iraq-Kuwait conflict to the Palestinian problem by assuring them that their involvement in the Middle-Eastern peace process need not hinge on the diplomacy they conducted with Saddam but would continue after the crisis was over.

Despite its multiple motivations, the statement was also a genuine vote of confidence in the US-Soviet relationship and in the prospects for future cooperation within Bush's hoped-for "new world order." For this reason, although it was probably the biggest single diplomatic concession granted to the Soviet Union by the US during the entire Persian Gulf crisis, the gesture was such that it had to be made unilaterally, not as part of a *quid pro quo* for some specific Soviet action in the Middle East. There are perhaps four basic motivations for making unilateral commitments in world politics: to build good will and a sense of obligation in the other side, to strengthen a weak ally's domestic position, to expose an opponent's true reasons for disagreement by capitulating to its phony ones, or, from a position of abject weakness, because nothing else is possible. Without a doubt, the first two were at work in this instance.

President Bush may have thought initially that his politics of generosity had failed. In his reply, Gorbachev praised the cooperation that the US and USSR had achieved over European issues and the Gulf crisis, not failing to allude to the considerable political costs he had paid over the former. Gorbachev also politely complained that he had not been consulted before the decision to send US troops to the Gulf. In this case, Bush justified himself, but remarked that "I take your words as constructive criticism. Obviously, I should have telephoned you then. I want to assure you that we did not want to act behind your back." In passing it should be noted that despite this gracious reply, when the US administration decided to augment its troop strength in the region again in early November, the Soviets got just the same kind of "consultation" they did the first time - a phone call by Baker to inform Shevardnadze of the President's decision hours before it was announced publicly.²¹

When Gorbachev reviewed the "three points of principal significance in what you have said," he mentioned world resolve to end the crisis, Bush's statement on the temporary nature of the US presence in the region, and his expressed preference for a non-military solution. Bush's major gesture was nowhere in sight; Gorbachev seemed not to have noticed it. Gorbachev made a

litany of arguments against a military solution: attacking Iraq without a military “provocation” on its part would make the US look like an aggressor; military action would involve large casualties and revive “memories of Afghanistan and Vietnam;” war would be economically costly and would provoke the ire of the “hugely large forces” of the Arab nation; a “guardedness showing itself... in the Western countries” would be exacerbated if “events begin to evolve in the opposite direction;” China could shatter the unity of the Security Council; and, of course, public opinion in the US would “take all of this very hard.”

Perhaps it would not be too much to read something of a positive message for Bush out of these arguments: at least if Gorbachev was warning him of the possibility of his losing the support of China and his Western allies, he was not saying that the Soviets would be the first to bolt. All the same, Gorbachev made it crystal clear that he opposed the use of force as a way of expelling Saddam from Kuwait. Referring to his “Arabist” advisors that James Baker loves to excoriate in his memoirs, Gorbachev cited to Bush the opinion of his

“many strong experts on the Arab world, and, in particular, on Iraq. We have discussed the situation with them. They made a detailed situational analysis. And they came to an entirely definite conclusion. The only situation in which it would be acceptable to use force against Iraq would be if it were to make an attack on Saudia Arabia or Jordan. In all the other situations the use of force must be ruled out.”

Probably it was only by a slip of the tongue that Gorbachev left Israel conspicuously out in the cold; earlier he had said that the US would look like the aggressor unless Saddam attacked Saudia Arabia or “through Jordan,...Israel.”

Whatever the case, Gorbachev went on to enumerate a plan which, although unfortunately omitted in the original of the translation, probably involved some offer to Saddam to link an international initiative on the Palestinian issue as an invitation to some positive counter-move on his part.²² Gorbachev went on to argue that

“such an approach would permit one to seize the initiative, to deprive Hussein of the propaganda points which he is accumulating in the Arab world, of the aura of

a hero of the Arab nation. If Saddam accepts this plan, then it will be possible to move on to an over-all resolution... [Y]ou and we will appear in another light, really as advocates of a political resolution”

Gorbachev’s assessment of the domestic political benefit the plan would bring him as an “advocate of a political resolution” seems more reasonable than his calculations about who would get the credit in the Arab world for a peace-plan based on linkage.

At the end of his statement, Gorbachev made a personal appeal to Bush against the use of force, turning to him “as a friend” and urging him that “[y]ou must choose.” He insisted that “[w]e are truly dealing with a paranoiac, but for this very reason we must offer him some sort of a biscuit.” His closing sentence, at least, was one that Bush could safely agree with: “[o]f course, before speaking with the others, perhaps it would make sense to sound him out as well, to send someone to him, perhaps, without letting him in on the essence of the plan itself.” The relieved Bush assented that “I think that in any case one has to try to sound him out;” certainly there was there was no harm in letting the Soviets talk to Hussein, especially if they made no specific offers on behalf of the international community.

It is understandable that Bush was concerned when he left the first half of the conference to consult with his aides. Gorbachev had not even seemed to take much notice of the major American gesture on Mideast cooperation aside from perhaps in a vague observation at one point that “Mr. President, you have stated many interesting thoughts, which we are taking into consideration and to which we will respond.” In addition, Bush had somewhat taken to heart Gorbachev’s passionate defense of a concession in the interests of peace. When told by Baker “not to worry” about Gorbachev’s demand for an international peace conference, Bush replied that “‘I’ve got to worry about it. I put all those kids out there... If I can get them out of there without fighting, I’ll do it.’”²³

In the event, Baker had already convinced Shevardnadze to accept a draft announcing that the Presidents of the US and USSR would consider taking “additional steps” if Saddam refused to

withdraw from Kuwait. He had, as Bush did with Gorbachev, for the first time broached with Shevardnadze the matter of authorizing the use of force if sanctions did not work. According to Baker, he made it clear that *for the moment* he was only asking for a statement on “additional steps:” “I’m not asking you to sign a blank check, and I’m not asking you to do it [i.e. authorize force] today. I’m just outlining, in response to your question about next steps, the direction we might want to go in.”²⁴ Unlike the President, Baker made it completely clear to his interlocutor what the US needed now and what it could be expected to request in the future. Baker’s lawyerly approach worked well with Shevardnadze. The draft he agreed to included language about “additional steps” and said nothing about holding a Mideast peace conference.

When the meeting between Gorbachev and Bush reconvened in the second half of the day, the process of editing the public statement went very favorably for the US. The Baker-Shevardnadze version largely won the day, with only a mention of the countries’ intention to work together for security and conflict resolution in the Middle East once the UN Security Council resolutions had been fulfilled.²⁵ Baker says that in return for not announcing a peace conference immediately the US negotiators had “privately committed” to working with the Soviets to convene one once the crisis was resolved. No doubt this agreement was facilitated by Bush’s announcement earlier in the day about America’s newly inclusive policy in the Middle East.

Any remaining doubts on the President’s part as to whether Gorbachev valued his initiative would have evaporated during the press conference, when he was clearly brimming over with the news: “I don’t know, may I reveal a secret? I haven’t consulted with the President, but I very much want to divulge it. Even if it means taking a risk...” He went on to spell out the US policy change. The initiative *had* made an impression and also lent Gorbachev some domestic political currency, at least for a time. Two days after the press conference, for instance, the conservative *Pravda* published an article praising Washington’s willingness to cooperate with the Soviets in the Middle East instead of adhering to “its former principles” of “forc[ing] it ‘out of the game,’” and

went on to exult at the observation, doubtless overdrawn in both directions, that Western newspapers no longer referred to the Soviet Union as a “‘second-rate’ country,” but now talked about it as an “equal partner of the US.”²⁶ This sort of sentiment would be eroded later on in the crisis, but for a time Gorbachev’s standing among Soviet political elites had evidently been boosted.

In the coming weeks, Gorbachev also got a helping hand from the US in economic terms. Gorbachev’s request for “help with goods and in a financial capacity” at the end of the Helsinki meeting had not received an encouraging response from Bush, who made the perennial complaint about Congressional restraints on spending. However, in his memoirs Baker notes that just days later, on 13 September, Gorbachev drew him aside during a round of meetings to ask whether, given their own budget limitations, the Americans could help arrange for the Saudis to extend \$4-5 billion to the USSR in aid. Two weeks later, Baker talked to the Saudis and recommended that they extend him some financial aid, which they did to the tune of \$4 billion in credits. The Soviets were duly grateful, and Gorbachev at some point phoned to thank President Bush. Baker remarks that “I believe that our role in arranging the line of credit was instrumental in solidifying Soviet support for the use-of-force resolution and keeping them firmly in the coalition throughout the crisis.”²⁷ The money evidently came with no specific strings attached, but it certainly must have left Gorbachev with a sense of obligation and reinforced the message that cooperation with the US brought substantial rewards, both impressions to which the US could appeal, implicitly or explicitly, when it again came time to ask the Soviets to pull their weight on behalf of the international coalition.

Throughout October, Yevgeny Primakov engaged on a series of diplomatic errands for the Soviet President. On 18 October, he visited Washington with a plan that proposed not only a public commitment to the Mideast peace conference, the very thing the US negotiators had fought so hard against in Helsinki, but also the possible cession of two islands and an oil field.²⁸ His plan

naturally fell on unsympathetic ears, and as Freedman and Karsh note, it was all the easier for the Americans to reject since they knew that Shevardnadze and Vitaly Vorontsov, the Soviet ambassador to the UN, did not approve of Primakov's mission.²⁹ Shevardnadze in particular was consistently the US's best ally in the Soviet foreign policy circle, and throughout the crisis was the first person to be consulted about any substantive new US initiative. Gorbachev, however, was more inclined toward creative diplomacy in the interests of peace, and Bush took the trouble of sending a message to him emphasizing that Primakov's plan was unacceptable.³⁰

Gorbachev's enthusiasm for a peaceful resolution of the Gulf crisis involving some sort of concessions to Saddam Hussein remained undiminished in the weeks following Helsinki. He visited François Mitterrand in Rambouie on 29 October 1990 with news of Primakov's meeting the previous day with Hussein. At least one of the Americans' points at Helsinki had been incorporated into Primakov's message: he had told Hussein "that he could hardly hope for a 'package resolution' of the situation... according to the principle of a strict linkage between the Kuwait crisis and the resolution of the other problems in the region." Primakov had also rejected on the spot Saddam's proposal that all sides announce that they would reject the use of force in resolving the crisis.

Ironically, Gorbachev's own private position as he expressed it to Mitterrand did not sound too far from an unconditional rejection of the use of force. He described a military resolution in such dark terms as to make it sound well-nigh unthinkable. Gorbachev was clinging to the hope that "Primakov's mission is important in the sense that it made clear the chance for moving in the direction of a political settlement of the crisis." This "chance" would seem to have been visible in Saddam's remark that he could not announce a troop pullout if he were not informed of what assurances he would be given as to the removal of US forces from Saudia Arabia, the ending of UN Security Council sanctions, a settlement assuring Iraq's access to the sea, and the issue of linkage between a troop departure and the resolution of the Palestinian

problem.³¹ The optimistic Soviets had taken the fact that Saddam was at last talking about withdrawal, even though only in the context of inviting concessions from the international community, as a sign of real progress.

Gorbachev, whose hopes for peace and fear of war were skillfully massaged by Primakov in every report from the field, evidently did not see a fundamental discrepancy between his repeated emphasis on the primary importance of acting within a unified Security Council and the possibility of a peaceful settlement. His position was summed up by the comment that “[w]e must act decisively, consistently, and must display unity while striving in every way to avoid sliding towards a military resolution.” To this sentiment, which followed on the heels of an apocalyptic description of the consequences a war in the Gulf would bring, even Mitterrand felt obliged to respond that it was “difficult to rule out [war] *a priori*. We must not create dangerous illusions.”

Without a doubt, Mitterrand shared Gorbachev’s sentiment that war was on the cards “if we do not give Hussein anything.” He shared with the Soviet president a plan for involving a “transitional phase in the resolution of the Kuwait issue,” although the details are lost in an omission in the original. The problem with all such free-lance initiatives, of course, was that they did not have the authorization of the other key allies, the USA and Britain. Mitterrand was already taking international heat for his overtures, which a week earlier had led Saddam to release only the *French* hostages in the hopes of a reciprocal gesture from Mitterrand,³² and in the Rambouie meeting Gorbachev complained of the letters he had received from Bush and Thatcher criticizing Primakov’s latest mission as potentially divisive. Neither Primakov nor Mitterrand’s emissaries could authoritatively propose concessions on behalf of the international community, and Saddam was not making life any easier, since he refused even to contemplate leaving Kuwait without them.

In this climate, the French and Soviets were on a fairly short leash, diplomatically speaking. Mitterrand admitted to Gorbachev that he had not yet even spoken to the United States or Great Britain about his peace plan involving a “transitional phase.” Nor did Gorbachev indicate

that he had any plan aside from “continuing to press our arguments to Hussein, cautioning him against a course toward provoking the use of force, at the same time [as we] work with our partners in the spirit [i.e. of ‘coolness and calm’] we are talking about.” The very narrowness of Gorbachev’s diplomatic options at this stage probably predisposed him to agree to the US’s call for a resolution authorizing force, since something new was needed to break the diplomatic deadlock.

On 8 November 1990, James Baker arrived in Moscow to discuss the next steps to be taken against Saddam. Gorbachev began the discussion with a very warm statement about his interest in the political fortunes of the Bush administration and in cooperating with the US.

“Rapprochement, closer cooperation between our countries, governments, and peoples in the interests of positive changes throughout the entire world - that is our contribution to world civilization... Whatever happens to you, we want to act and to agree in such a way as to be together with you, side by side with you. Perhaps that is the most important choice we have made.”

Even by Gorbachev’s rhetorical standards, this was quite extraordinary. It was an expression of how closely Gorbachev had tied his fate to cooperation with the US, of his appreciation for the Bush administration’s support and of his anxiety over his own domestic position. Baker must have known from before he began speaking that the Gorbachev would ultimately sign on to the resolution the United States wanted.

Before the meeting with Gorbachev, Baker had done his preliminary work with Shevardnadze. It was a sign of America’s increasingly powerful position that Baker could inform Shevardnadze of the plans to augment US forces in the Gulf by another 200,000 men without any apparent protest on the Soviets’ part (at least Baker noted none from Shevardnadze). Baker managed to convince Shevardnadze, in part thanks to a detailed exposition of allied battle plans by a US general, that the military option was feasible and that a security council resolution permitting force would be appropriate.³³

Having lined up the Foreign Minister, Baker set about persuading the more skeptical Gorbachev. His argument proceeded on several fronts. He opened with the first and central point:

“we are convinced that the madman we are dealing with will withdraw from Kuwait only if he can be convinced that we are serious and decisive.” This would appeal to Gorbachev’s desire for a peaceful solution; only a credible threat would force Saddam to comply with the international community’s demands. To add a note of urgency, Baker argued that “[w]e are not sure that time is on our side,” given the fact that Saddam Hussein “manipulates public opinion skillfully and cruelly,” and, Baker implied, might succeed in eventually eroding Bush’s public support, on behalf of which Gorbachev had expressed such solicitude at the beginning of the conversation.

Gorbachev responded to this by saying that “[w]e have noted that in this situation you are not losing your cool. In contrast, for instance, to Mrs. Thatcher, who, in my opinion, is beginning to cross the line from the rational to the emotional [*sic*].” To this, Baker skillfully retorted that “[t]he thing is that we know who will be the casualties in this conflict.” This was another important reminder - that the British and (especially) the US were “ready to assume responsibility for the dirtiest part of this operation.” Baker also repeated his offer to include some Soviet troops in the international force, this time in a positively encouraging tone: “I cannot get rid of the thought that if it becomes necessary to use force, the picture of Americans and Russians fighting side by side (even if your participation is limited to a small sub-unit) would make a very strong impression.” Here he was no doubt thinking of the impression made on *American* minds of such a spectacle. From the Soviet point of view, having a small number of troops tag along with the American juggernaut probably would have made the wrong sort of impression about the nature of US-Soviet cooperation.

Again invoking the urgency of a resolution, Baker pointed to the very concrete time constraint posed by the end of the US chairmanship of the UN Security Council in three weeks’ time. “After this, Yemen, Cuba and Zimbabwe will chair, and then there is not much chance that we will be able to put through the proposed draft resolution.” In his memoirs, Baker notes that “[o]ur diplomatic timetable was driven by [this] simple, unyielding reality.” He might also have

added that ultimately it was also a convenient reality from the US point of view. A real deadline helped make the American case for prompt action. Just as in the case of the Iraqi challenge to the Gulf embargo that allowed the US to push for coercive enforcement of sanctions in the UN, this necessity would be made into a virtue by American diplomats. It was a pattern that the US could follow thanks largely to its skillful diplomatic spadework and the global balance of power which weighed so heavily in its favor.

Baker made a further argument for haste, one which could apply to the date of implementation of a resolution as well as to the deadline for its passage. By February, he opined somewhat inaccurately, the “rainy season, Ramadan, and pilgrimages to holy sites” would make it impossible to carry out the military option. Furthermore, waiting until fall for more favorable conditions would put the Americans in the impossible position of maintaining their large troop presence in the area for another several months.

Having demonstrated why the international community could not afford to procrastinate on a Security Council resolution permitting the use of force, Baker indicated that the United States was willing to go it alone if Soviet consent could not be obtained. He recalled the arguments of those early on in the crisis who had argued that the US should use force on the basis of Article 51 of the UN Charter rather than get “tied up in procedural arguments” in the Security Council. The President had resisted such arguments, Baker continued, and he “considers that we acted correctly. For the same reason, he sent me on this trip with instructions to find out whether it is possible for us to go on acting within the framework of the UN.” This was a powerful threat. If Gorbachev vetoed a multilateral endorsement of force and the United States went it alone, he would discredit his policy of superpower partnership at home and lose the good will of the US. The Soviet Union would also look toothless, able to do little more than complain about a massive campaign by its former Cold War adversary just a few hundred miles south of its borders. For Gorbachev, such an outcome must have been unthinkable.

In the wrap-up to his presentation, Baker made sure that Gorbachev was not left with any illusions about the firm US intention to use force on the basis of the proposed resolution, if need be. Drawing on his favorable prior conversation with the Foreign Minister for rhetorical support, Baker said “I agree with E.A. Shevardnadze’s observation that after the first of January, if Saddam does not withdraw from Kuwait, we will have to act, or otherwise we will lose respect.” At the same time, he left room for the hope (which in private he had more or less abandoned by this time, according to his memoirs³⁴) that the resolution would finally persuade Saddam to comply with UN demands: “I do not see any other way if we really want to attain the implementation of the UN resolution.”

Gorbachev responded to this strongly argued case by thanking Baker for sharing the American plans with him and promising to “think all of this over very seriously.” In the course of “think[ing] aloud,” Gorbachev assured his American interlocutor that “[w]e want the United States and us to be together, for us to be able to settle this crisis together. For that reason, we must use the potential of the UN Security Council, and we will cooperate with you in that.” In a part of the conversation that is omitted from the original document, the Soviet President threw out the idea of two successive resolutions, one authorizing the use of force after a six-week hiatus and the other, redundantly, ordering the beginning of military action if he had not withdrawn thereafter. Baker quite rightly argued that this was impossibly cumbersome, and instead “proposed to split the difference - a single resolution embracing Gorbachev’s pause, with a date certain after which the use of force was authorized.”³⁵

In reality, to argue that this was “splitting the difference” was a polite fiction, since by implication Baker had already proposed a resolution on force with a built-in deadline. Only the British objected to a resolution including an ultimatum date, on the grounds that it gave Saddam more room for diplomatic maneuver.³⁶ Nevertheless, it was useful to be able to give the impression of “going half-way,” as the Soviets liked to say, during the negotiation. In the wee hours of the

morning on 19 November, Shevardnadze expressed Soviet consent to this “compromise version,” which authorized the use of “all necessary means” and a “good-will” pause to give Saddam time to relent.³⁷

We have the text of a one-on-one meeting between Bush and Gorbachev in Paris later during that same day. Essentially, the legal leg-work had already been accomplished by Baker, and it remained only for the two men to formalize the agreement. Accordingly, Bush’s tone was personal and cordial. There was no need to drop hints about Article 51 at this point. Bush touched on the themes that would strike the Soviet leader as congenial. He assured Gorbachev in sincere emotional terms of his desire for peace; during a visit to an American military base in Germany he had “looked in our boys’ eyes” and thought “I do not want them to have to go into battle.” Despite the fact that both men knew the deal had already basically been done, Bush had the courtesy not to take anything for granted. “In this issue, I need your help,” he said. He gave Gorbachev the maximum latitude possible, saying that “[i]f you cannot give me a conclusive answer yet, I would be ready to understand you, but all the same, I ask you to take into account the fact that your answer has an extraordinarily important significance for us.” Perhaps Bush went a bit too far in the direction of generosity when he said that: “[i]f in the given case you cannot help me, then we will cooperate nonetheless. But I am asking you to help me send Saddam this signal. We calculate that it will be enough [to compel] Saddam to do what is demanded of him.” Baker never went as far as to promise unconditional US cooperation with the Soviets, and he talked about the use-of-force resolution in terms of the last, best chance for peace rather than a measure that the US actually calculated would work. Perhaps Bush’s hopes in this regard were genuinely different from his Secretary of State’s, given that he had supreme responsibility for ordering a war.

In any case, Bush’s soft and gentle approach worked well in the immediate circumstances. Gorbachev was not about to try his luck with his generous interlocutor. He voiced support for the Security Council resolution, commenting that “it should incorporate your proposal and mine” and

spelling out the version worked out by Baker and Shevardnadze as if it were his own. When Bush asked about an appropriate duration for the grace period, Gorbachev replied that it should last until the “middle of January.”³⁸ The Soviet President also raised the idea of bilateral meetings between the ministers of foreign affairs of the US and Soviet Union and Iraq’s leadership, to which Bush replied that “[i]t seems to me that such a bilateral approach has great merits.”

After the Security Council’s vote on 29 November to allow member states to use “all necessary means” against Saddam in the Gulf, Soviet bilateral missions of the sort Gorbachev touched on would cause all sorts of headaches for US leaders. By that time, however, the Americans at least had international law, time, and the military initiative on their side. Only a clever diplomatic gesture on the part of Saddam Hussein could have been deeply damaging to US control of the situation, and the Iraqi leader obliged by stonewalling or being ham-handed in all of his international moves. For all Gorbachev’s desperate last-minute peace initiatives, none of them were accepted by Bush in the absence of a convincing Iraqi move to withdraw from Kuwait.

Without a doubt, the Gulf crisis demanded a new level of international cooperation in US-Soviet relations. For the first time, the Soviet Union and United States were interacting not opposite one another, but as uneasy allies in a multilateral coalition directed against a third party. The US had the distinct advantage of actually leading the coalition. It had a clear program of escalating pressure on Iraq until it withdrew or was expelled from Kuwait, and had the military wherewithal to back up its plans. Most remarkable in the history of the negotiations, perhaps, is the rarity with which Bush and Baker needed to rely directly on threats of going it alone to induce cooperation from Gorbachev. Just as often, they used the pace of events to demand international support, granted favors to the Soviets that were not specifically linked to concessions but engendered a sense of obligation, exploited the different positions taken by Shevardnadze and Gorbachev and the different negotiating styles and roles of Bush and Baker, catered to Gorbachev’s hopes, and flattered him.

For their part, the Soviet leaders were at a structural disadvantage in the relationship. They had no military presence in the region and did not directly control when shots were fired or missiles launched. Gorbachev in particular was heavily dependent politically on continued cooperation with the US. He had the power of assent, but rarely of initiative. Almost as important as these handicaps were the unrealistic aspects of Gorbachev's "new thinking." He held almost as a postulate that force would never really be necessary in international politics, that a negotiated solution was always possible if one tried hard enough. Saddam Hussein was just the man to falsify that assumption. For both structural and ideological reasons, Gorbachev never managed to adhere to a realistic tactical approach to the international coalition. No doubt he could have gained more either by throwing greater support behind the coalition, a measure that might even have persuaded Saddam to budge before Kuwait was overrun, taking the political risk of sending some troops or ships to the Gulf and reaping greater financial and diplomatic kudos, or otherwise taking a more stand-offish, hard line on peace in response to Western overtures in the hopes of extracting more significant concessions from them. Neither approach was necessarily superior in all respects to what Gorbachev actually did, but they might have made the outcome of the crisis something less of a disappointment than it ended up being for the Soviet Union.

At the end of the diplomatic games in the Gulf, the US came out an undisputed (if temporary) winner, and the Soviet Union, if not a big loser, at the least an overshadowed ally.

- ¹ James Baker, III with Thomas DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1995, 277-8.
- ² Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, 79.
- ³ op.cit., 80.
- ⁴ Nosenko in ed. Alex Danchev and Dan Keohane, *International Perspectives on the Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991*, Macmillan, London and New York, 1994, 140.
- ⁵ Baker, 1995, 282.
- ⁶ op. cit., 282.
- ⁷ op. cit., 283.
- ⁸ See Current Digest of the Soviet Press (henceforward CDSP), 1990, Vol. XLII, No. 42, pp. 8-9.
- ⁹ CDSP, 1990, Vol. XLII, No. 31, p. 4-5.
- ¹⁰ CDSP, 1990, Vol. XLII, No. 32, p.6.
- ¹¹ Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom*, 1991, 202.
- ¹² Baker, 1995, 283.
- ¹³ Transcript of discussion between Gorbachev and Bush, 9 September 1990.
- ¹⁴ Freedman and Karsh, 1993, 144-5.
- ¹⁵ op.cit., 146.
- ¹⁶ Baker, 1995, 286-7.
- ¹⁷ op. cit., 291.
- ¹⁸ Robert Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington, D.C., 1997, 146.
- ¹⁹ op. cit., 148.
- ²⁰ See Baker, 1995, 282-3.
- ²¹ op. cit., 310.
- ²² See Freedman and Karsh, 1993, 175-6.
- ²³ Baker, 1995, 292-3.
- ²⁴ op. cit., 1995, 292.
- ²⁵ CDSP, Vol. XLII, No. 37, p. 12.
- ²⁶ CDSP, Vol. XLII, No. 37, p. 32.
- ²⁷ Baker, 1995, 294-5.
- ²⁸ op.cit., 398.
- ²⁹ Freedman and Karsh, 1993, 177.
- ³⁰ Baker, 1995, 400.
- ³¹ Yevgeny Primakov in *Pravda*, 3 March 1991, p. 5.
- ³² Jolyon Howorth in ed. Danchev and Keohane, 1994, p. 182.
- ³³ Baker, 1995, 310-311.
- ³⁴ op.cit., 301.
- ³⁵ op.cit., 312.
- ³⁶ See, for instance, op. cit., 320.
- ³⁷ op.cit., 316-7.
- ³⁸ The question of the ultimatum date was revisited in a *petit drame* right before the Security Council vote. The US pushed for January 1, Gorbachev for the 31st. In the end, after an ingenious suggestion from the French that the two sides split the difference, they settled back to the date that had already been raised, without apparent objection from Bush during the 19 November meeting. Baker, 1995, 321.