

# Gulf opens between East, West

**T**he world may shortly know if Iraq has accepted Mikhail Gorbachev's peace plan to end the Gulf War. Tariq Aziz, Iraq's suave foreign minister, is due in Moscow today, carrying with him Saddam Hussein's reply to the Soviet peace initiative.

We have now come to a most fascinating moment in the Gulf war. The ground offensive is about to begin. Supremely confident U.S. generals predict their armored divisions and close air support will slaughter the already badly battered Iraqi army. There is even talk of striking directly at Baghdad.

Enter the Soviets, who have been sitting on the sidelines, growing increasingly unhappy as they watch former ally Iraq being pounded into rubble. Their peace plan most likely involves a ceasefire, followed by a rapid, total Iraqi pullout from Kuwait. In return, Iraq will be spared from further attack and Saddam Hussein's regime will be allowed to stay in power.

Some time later, after a discreet interval, Moscow will promote a major international conference to address the problem of the Palestinians.

So far, American reaction to the Soviet plan has ranged from scorn to outrage. And to dismay that the Iraqis might actually pull out of Kuwait. President George Bush quite clearly does not want a ceasefire. His goal is to utterly destroy Iraq's military-industrial power, kill Saddam Hussein and humiliate Iraq.

As China's leader, Deng Xiaoping quipped yesterday, a big bully — the U.S. — was determined to teach a small, regional bully — Iraq — a lesson it won't forget. But, at the same time, Bush had to leave the door slightly ajar to peace talks lest he be accused of being a bash-Iraq warmonger instead of the palladin of the UN coalition.

We'll study the proposal, said Bush's men, with obvious distaste and ill will. Back fired the Soviet foreign minister: Our peace plan was addressed to Baghdad, not to Washington. Mind your own business, Mr. Bush.

Adding to U.S. displeasure, Italy boldly announced yesterday that it backed the Soviet peace plan. Germany, France and Spain are not

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far behind. Europe, minus the British, is lining up with Moscow. The UN secretary general says he backs the plan. So does that key player in the Gulf drama — Iran. Most non-aligned nations will also support the Soviet plan.

Whether or not Iraq accepts the Soviet peace plan, we are now seeing the beginning of a major split between the U.S. and USSR — one that may endanger the entire process of superpower detente and arms reduction. Moscow's passivity in the current crisis has ended. The Soviets will now begin an active campaign to restore their tattered influence in the Mideast and seek to profit from the surging hatred of the U.S. across the Muslim world.

This presents President Bush with two nasty problems.

First, he has staked his political future on the crusade to eliminate Saddam Hussein. If Bush fails to overthrow the man he brands a second Hitler, the president will again be called a wimp and derided as a second Neville Chamberlain. If the Soviet peace plan goes through, Saddam will be left in bomb-battered Baghdad, thumbing his nose at a furious George Bush while the Arab world cheers.

Second, the delicate process of ending the Cold War seems to be breaking down. By far exceeding the UN mandate to free Kuwait — and going on to pulverize Iraq — Bush has forced the Soviets to take action. As a great power and neighbor of Iraq, the USSR cannot sit back and watch the U.S. treat the entire Mideast like another Central America.

Bush's war of egos with Saddam is threatening to rekindle U.S.-USSR geopolitical rivalry.

War always generates its own momentum. In the U.S., the military-industrial complex, right-wing Republicans and backers of Israel are demanding that the war go on until Saddam's head is on a platter. Like Cato the Censor, who ended every speech in the Roman Senate with "Carthage must be destroyed," these hawks say Iraq must be castrated and lobotomized for good.

There are die-hards in the Iraqi leadership who will urge: "Why not fight to the finish? The U.S. has already bombed everything worth hitting, setting Iraq back 30-40 years. Let's at least kill as many U.S. soldiers as possible. Since the U.S. is talking about killing us or putting us on trial in kangaroo courts, what have we to lose? We'll say a polite no thanks to Moscow and battle to the bloody end."

Whatever the case, the U.S.-led coalition is finally beginning to come apart as it becomes clear to all that the U.S. has its own secret agenda in the Gulf war. President Bush will now be tempted even more strongly to unleash the ground offensive before the Soviet peace offensive stops the war he badly wants to go on.