

Superpowers can bring peace to Mideast

Presidents George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev are due to meet in gloomy Helsinki today — Europe's version of Winnipeg — where they will endeavor not to let Saddam Hussein ruin their flowering romance. But, try as they may, that old black Mideast magic might just put the whammy on the U.S.-USSR love-in.

First, the positives. Chummy relations between the two superpowers are more important than poking Saddam in the eye. Nothing must be allowed to derail entente.

Moscow, which has joined the embargo against Iraq, just ran out of bread. How humiliating. Blocked Iraqis are munching away on fresh pita while grumpy Muscovites glare at bare bakery shelves.

Quick! The USSR needs American help. Maybe even Care packages and surplus Spam.

Poor old Mother Russia has turned into a hag lady. Gorbachev will sit down with Bush and say something like, "My dear Georgichik, you have Muslims, we have Muslims. They are making much troubles. Let's squash them together."

Bush will smile, and reply, "Mike, you're on. I'm fed up with those turban-twisters."

The U.S. and USSR, let's recall, have the world's two largest remaining colonial empires — and both of them are filled with Muslims. America's modern Raj in the Mideast is made up of Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the Gulf Emirates. Any pretense that these nations are not U.S. protectorates was dispelled last week when State Secretary James Baker announced that U.S. forces had extended an "umbrella of protection" to the Gulf states as well as Saudi Arabia. And, most significantly, that U.S. forces would stay in the region for the foreseeable future, creating a new "security structure."

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In other words, a Greater U.S. Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Inside Gorbachev's increasingly disunited Soviet Union are 70, 80 or maybe even 100 million Muslims spread across the "republics" — or, more accurately, bantustans — of Soviet Central Asia. These regions are seething with unrest or open revolt.

Islamic nationalism has even spread to Chinese-ruled Sinkiang where a Muslim uprising was just put down — without a peep of protest by the outside world.

The Kremlin does not want to lose the Islamic empire it acquired in the 19th century any more than the U.S. wants to give up its Mideast Raj and control of the world's major oil reserves. But those irksome Muslim nationalists — branded as fundamentalist fanatics by the western media or Muslim bandits by the communist press — keep trying to throw off American and Russian hegemony. So Bush and Gorbachev will try to work out some way of dealing with this threat.

A good start will be to sell the Afghan resistance down the river of expediency by cutting off U.S. aid and making a deal over Afghanistan that will leave the loathsome Marxist leader, Najibullah, who makes Saddam like a naughty leprechaun, in charge of the country. That's the positive side.

But there's also a strong negative undercurrent. Much as Gorbachev wants to be rid of irksome Muslims, his generals are increasingly alarmed at seeing a huge — and now evidently permanent — U.S. force only 800 miles south of the Soviet border.

"Wait a minute," Russians will rightly say, "we pull our men out of East Europe and the U.S. reciprocates by moving troops into Saudi Arabia and the Gulf! What's wrong with this picture?"

As the USSR faces possible disintegration, the idea of having U.S. ground forces within striking distance of the troubled Caucasian republics of Armenia or Azerbaijan — or of Central Asia — deeply alarms Soviet strategists. Influential Soviets are now demanding that Gorbachev get U.S. forces out of the Mideast — or else threaten to break off the U.S.-Soviet entente.

Equally important, Gorbachev will demand that the U.S. force Israel to give back occupied Arab territory, make peace with the Palestinians and end the nightmarish civil war in Lebanon. Without such a comprehensive Mideast peace settlement, say the Soviets, the region will continue to boil. Saddam Hussein is only part of the problem.

Underlying this danger, Israel's government-run TV just announced that use of all Arabic names for Palestinian towns and villages in Israel and the occupied territories was banned. Only Biblical Hebrew names may be used. Just the way Saddam incorporated Kuwait into "historical" Iraq, complete with name changes and references to the glorious empire of Nebuchadnezzar.

Such Old Testament geopolitics guarantees more wars. If Bush and Gorbachev seize this excellent chance to pacify the inflamed Mideast, some good may yet come out of Saddam Hussein's badness.