

The Gulf money drain

Keeping the U.S. armada bobbing around in the dangerous waters of the Persian Gulf is costing Washington about \$1.3 million a day.

Add repair bills for the damaged USS *Stark* and wear and tear on U.S. warships and since September alone, the expense of escorting 11 reflagged Kuwaiti tankers has been around \$350 million — and the bills keep coming with no end in sight.

Washington has precious little to show for its investment. The Gulf Arabs and Saudi Arabia have been cheered up a bit by the U.S. Navy, but attacks on tankers continue without pause. On the Gulf War's more important land front, Iraq is bracing for another imminent Iranian attack against Basra.

Clearly, Iran's angry mullahs have not been cowed by all the western naval huffing and puffing along their coasts. Nor have they been moved at all by UN calls for a ceasefire.

How then is Washington going to save its beleaguered Iraqi ally?

Some policymakers, as I noted recently, are hoping that somehow Egypt will rescue Iraq by sending large numbers of troops to plug up any Iranian breakthrough. Egyptians are not eager to go off and fight in Mesopotamia. Besides, Gen. Hosni Mubarak cannot completely trust his conscript troops to do battle with the Iranians whom many Egyptians regard with growing admiration.

After having been badly burned in the Yemeni civil war of the 1960s, the cautious Egyptians are not about to become America's Gurkhas in the Mideast.

Equally unsuccessful have been U.S. diplomatic efforts to impose a worldwide trade or arms embargo on Iran as a way of forcing Teheran to the bargaining table. The USSR, China and a host of other nations who are busy supplying Iran won't, so far, go along. Nor will Japan, a major importer of Iranian oil.

So Washington has now come up with another plan which has been bouncing around between the CIA, the National Security Council and the Pentagon. The way to force Iran to make peace with Iraq, goes this new scheme, is to block Iran's oil exports. Without revenue from oil, Iran cannot long continue to wage war. Iraq has tried for

**ERIC
MARGOLIS**



years to do just this, but without much success. The Americans are now itching to have a go.

The plan calls for the U.S. Navy to mine all of Iran's oil terminals, using state-of-the-art acoustic and pressure mines that would be extremely difficult to sweep. If necessary, major pumping stations at Siri, Larak and Kharg could be destroyed. U.S. warships would enforce a naval blockade that might also include stopping civilian as well as military cargoes. Doing all this would probably cut off 80% of Iran's oil exports.

There is, however, one big, and one lesser, but. No strategic boycott of Iran will work without Soviet cooperation. Teheran and Moscow are just now talking about pipelines to carry Iranian gas and perhaps oil north into the USSR's petroleum centre at Baku. The two unfriendly neighbors are also planning new rail and road links as well as a variety of heavy industrial projects. Moscow strongly backs Iraq but has managed to keep normal if cool relations with Iran.

Neither Washington nor Moscow want to see Iran win the Gulf War but neither do the Soviets want to permanently alienate the Iranians.

As a result, the Soviets must now be scratching their heads and trying to figure out their next move. Joining a U.S.-led blockade of Iran would likely end the war and save Iraq. But it would also infuriate the Iranians. What's more, a peace on the Gulf front would allow Iran to turn its attention to Afghanistan. But all this might happen anyway if Iraq collapses.

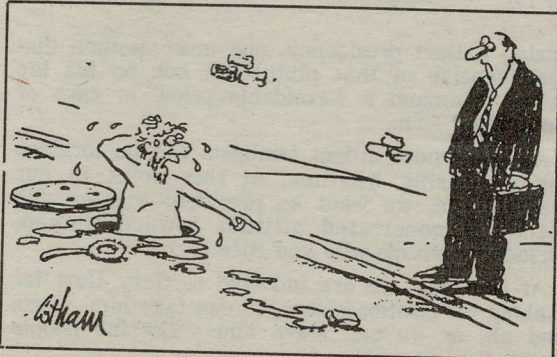
The Soviets must also worry about the threat of an Islamic upheaval in their own Moslem colonial empire. And nobody in the Kremlin would like to see U.S. forces attacking Iranian targets that are only a few hundred miles from the Soviet border.

The minor "but" concerns Pakistan. Iran might just be able to wiggle around a blockade by exporting its oil through neighboring Pakistan. Lately the Iranians and Pakistanis have been very chummy — so much, in fact, that Pakistan has withdrawn most of its 30,000 troops out of Saudi Arabia who were protecting the royal family from internal rebellion. This made the Iranians smile and the Saudis glower. Would Pakistan side with Iran? Maybe — particularly if the U.S. Congress keeps trying to sabotage Pakistan.

What happens with the blockade plan will, of course, really depend on Moscow. My guess is that the cautious Soviets will not go along with a full-scale military blockade but may agree to some milder economic pressure.

This, I suspect, will not work either. The chest-pounding Iranians, who now smell victory on the salty Gulf air, are not about to give up their holy war without a stiff fight.

Punch



"Pass me the soap, please."