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## Soviet Presence Astride the Southern Sea Lanes

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay—Trade missions to South America from the Soviet Union and East European countries have been increasing in recent years. Industrial machinery is offered, above all for energy production (hydroelectric turbines, components for nuclear-power stations, generators for thermoelectric plants), in exchange for raw materials. A third of Argentina's exports go to the Soviet Union, including most of its beef sales. Aeroflot, the Soviet airline, has offices in Lima, Peru, La Paz, Bolivia, and Buenos Aires, Argentina, and is planning to establish several more, although commercially the

### The Americas

by Alphonse Max

South American routes are unprofitable. Fishing rights within the 200-mile, offshore economic zone have been in force between the U.S.S.R. and Argentina for several years. The Soviets obtained generous concessions (especially from the military government that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983) for servicing their ships in Buenos Aires and the southern ports of Bahia Blanca and Comodoro Rivadavia. Uruguayan and Argentine ports also serve as supply stations for Soviet vessels bound for the Antarctic.

All this good will is looked on with some trepidation by those suspicious of Soviet motives. Besides the worry that a growing dependence on Soviet-bloc trade may give the Soviets some control over the internal structure of Latin nations, the Soviets' global intentions are also suspect. Civilian aircraft are often used by the Soviets for intelligence purposes, and most of their ships are equipped with sensitive electronic snooping gadgets.

The significance of the southern sea lanes in a world where the land mass is

concentrated in the Northern Hemisphere has long been recognized by the Soviets.

Of particular interest to the Soviets is the Antarctic continent, which is surrounded by all three oceans but whose northernmost land tip is closer to the South American mainland than to Africa or Australia. The U.S.S.R. maintains six permanent and several temporary stations in the Antarctic; some of them (including the Polish base Arctovsky) are located in the territory disputed between Argentina and Chile (and, in part, Britain). The icy continent is of such interest to the Soviets not only because of its strategic location but also because the Soviets conduct various scientific experiments there, including many with military applications.

In the 1970s, when the last Labor government held power in Britain, the Kremlin approached the British about the possibility of erecting a base for fishing trawlers and cargo ships on the Falkland/Malvinas Islands; these islands would be extremely valuable as a relay station for Soviet ships to and from the Antarctic. However, Moscow's discreet inquiries were rebuffed by Britain.

When Argentina occupied the islands in 1982, the Soviets rhetorically defended and supported the "fascist dictatorship" in the hope that, if the Argentines achieved sovereignty over the islands (as well as the smaller islands in the South Atlantic that they also claim) they would view Soviet plans more benevolently. Although the Soviet Union took no active part in the war, it offered to deliver arms and military supplies to the Argentines—an offer that was not accepted. The military government reciprocated the Soviets' "good will" by repeatedly defending the Soviet Union in the United Nations and elsewhere against accusations about human-rights violations.

The development of the dispute between Chile and Argentina regarding three small islands in the Beagle Channel—which almost blossomed into a full-fledged war in

December 1978—was also followed closely by Moscow. Argentina's military leaders concluded that in case of a war with Chile, the Soviet Union would side with Argentina; support of its trading partner would have meant an even greater Soviet presence in South America.

The long-standing Beagle controversy was settled peacefully in 1984, perhaps partially because the military men in Argentina had lost political power to a democratically elected civilian government. This was a major setback for Soviet strategy in the South Pacific.

The Soviets have suffered other setbacks in their South American political strategy, including the 1984 election of a conservative president, Leon Febres Cordero, in Ecuador. Such failures have spurred them to redouble their efforts in the waters of the Southern Hemisphere.

In June 1984, the Argentine undersecretary of maritime resources, Hector Rubin Praverseo, stated that 130 Soviet and Polish fishing vessels were active in the zone of exclusion around the Falklands. In May 1985, the minister of fishing for Peru, Ismael Benavides Ferreyros, stated that Russia was operating more than 250 fishing and factory ships along the Peruvian coast. The presence of more than 200 Polish, Soviet and Cuban ships along the Pacific coast of Ecuador, Peru and Chile was also described in an article in the July/August 1984 issue of *Progreso* magazine.

Of course, Moscow will hardly decide to invade South America by sea. But with its growing presence in the seas surrounding the half-continent, and possible new air routes and additional port facilities (whether they are called supply stations, fishing bases or whatever), as well as its increasing participation in vital infrastructure works, the Soviets' presence in the South Atlantic and Pacific deserves our close attention.

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