Carter Iran policy plays into Russian hands

By Lynn Middleton

What is the greatest threat to peace in the Mideast and West Asia? Most of the world's clear-thinking political figures would tell you Soviet expansion poses the gravest danger, evidenced by the USSR's brutal occupation of Afghanistan.

Why then, is the Carter administration moving closer and closer to military action against Iran, a country whose leaders are trying hard to stay out of the Soviet column?

Events of the last two weeks surrounding the hostage crisis have dramatized the basic contradiction in Carter's approach to curbing Soviet expansion. The president has claimed since the pronouncement of the Carter Doctrine three months ago that he favors forceful measures to get the Russians out of Afghanistan and keep them from threatening the sovereignty of other countries. Yet rather than seeking a method of doing this which can be broadly supported by the world's countries and peoples, he seems intent on matching Soviet hegemony-seeking with American hegemony-seeking.

In his April 17 speech, Carter banned all further Iranian imports, barred Americans from travel to Iran, claimed the right to appropriate Iranian funds in U.S. banks, ominously threatened the mining of Iran's harbors and blockading of its waterways, and demanded compliance with all these policies from the Western allies. One would have thought from his speech that it was the Tehran government which is the biggest threat to world peace, not Moscow.

BANI-SADR: Carter's policies are undermining the compromise sought inside Iran by the Iranian president.

(Interestingly enough, the Carter administration seems to be selectively enforcing its embargos. While trade with Iran has been effectiveiy frozen by the president's action, Dresser Industries and other companies continue to ship supposedly-embargoed strategic technology goods to Moscow, according to a recent report in Business Week.)

Carter's insistence on turning the economic and military screws tighter on Iran to force the release of the 50 American hostages have not worked to date, and there is no indication that they will. Even the families of some of the hostages have begun to abandon their reliance on the U.S. government to get their loved ones home safely. Last week, the parents of Sgt. Kevin Hermening went directly to Tehran, where the Revolutionary Council cooperated in allowing Mrs. Timm to see her son.

RESULTS OF CARTER POLICY

While showing no signs of getting the hostages home, Carter's policies have achieved the following results: 1) a hardening of the Iranian position against returning the hostages and an undermining of the steps towards compromise being sought inside Iran by President Bani-Sadr; 2) A new lease on life for pro-Soviet forces throughout the Islamic world, who can now more easily whitewash Soviet aggression in Afghanistan by pointing to U.S. military threats against Iran; 3) The heightening of divisions inside the Western alliance, causing exactly what Moscow would like to see—public feuding between the U.S., its NATO partners and Japan.

There is another road out of the crisis, but Carter refuses to take it. If the President would only admit the role which the United States historically played in propping up the shah in Iran and agree to one of the many possible formulas that have been suggested for investigating the shah's crimes, the way would be cleared for Bani-Sadr's government to get the hostages returned.

(For those who still naively believe that the U.S. never did anything wrong in Iran, the prestigious Washington Quarterly in its new issue documents the efforts of U.S. Air Force General Robert Huyser, on behalf of Carter, to foment a military coup after the shah's departure from Iran last January in a last desperate effort to forestall Ayatollah Khomeini's forces from coming to power.)

Earlier this month, ABC News Paris correspondent Pierre Salinger reported that the U.S. had come "within 20 minutes" of having the hostages turned over to the Iranian government by the students at the embassy. But just before the scheduled turn-over, word reached Tehran that Carter was not standing by his letter suggesting that the U.S. had in fact erred in its past Iran policy. Bani-Sadr has repeatedly indicated that any significant sign of compromise from the U.S. on admitting its past role and recognizing Iran's right to investigate the shah's crimes would allow the hostages to be freed.

Once the hostages are freed, Bani-Sadr's government could turn its attention towards its own pressing domestic problems, in order to keep Iran strong and secure and not allow it to drift into political chaos easily exploited by the Soviet Union and its agents. The U.S., by admitting some of its past wrongs, would also lay the basis for creating a new relationship of equality and mutual benefit with Iran.

Under such circumstances, a significant portion of Moscow's cover for its aggression would be eroded, and the spotlight would once again be focused squarely on Afghanistan. Western Europe and Japan would also no longer have to be forced to choose between their own economic and political interests in maintaining positive relations with Iran and the unity of the Western alliance, as Washington is now demanding they do.

The issue is this: If there is to be a common international front against Soviet expansion, it cannot be based on the U.S. forcing the rest of the world to submit to its dictates. By focusing his invective and his actions against Iran, Carter is only playing into the Russians' hands.