Russia's Unrealpolitik
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The disaster that has befallen Egypt and its Arab allies has created a situation of deep embarrassment for the Soviet Union that cannot be covered by its propaganda attacks on Israel or even a break in diplomatic relations.

Moscow permitted itself to be dragged into a dangerous adventure in the Middle East over which it was unable to maintain close control. The Kremlin now is trying to cut its losses without too much damage to its posture as "friend of the Arabs."

But it evidently is not able even to convince Cairo in its own interest to accept a rapid cease-fire. And the Soviet delegation had no choice yesterday in the Security Council but to continue lamely calling for a cease-fire by Israel, which had already agreed to halt the fighting whenever the Arabs did the same. The question now is whether wisdom will replace opportunism in Moscow. The miscalculations of recent weeks must be giving the Kremlin pause.

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It is doubtful that Moscow expected the Egyptian show of military strength last month, which the Soviet Union supported, to lead rapidly to this succession of events: withdrawal of the U.N. Emergency Force, Egyptian occupation of the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba and President Nasser's subsequent blockade which virtually assured war. Yet there is no sign that Russia's leaders seriously tried during this three-week period to terminate the crisis. Their inital errors were compounded by a naval demonstration that undoubtedly further encouraged Nasser's belligerence.

The Kremlin evidently believed that its huge arms shipments of the past decade to Egypt and the decline of British and French influence had changed the balance of power in the Middle East. Everything indicates that Moscow was taken by surprise both by Israel's decision to fight back and by the lightning destruction of the Egyptian and Jordanian forces. The loss of huge quantities of Soviet-provided military equipment was the penultimate humiliation, exceeded perhaps only by the fact that, having unleashed Nasser, Moscow is having trouble controlling his actions even in his hour of defeat.

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All this does not add up to another Cuba, for the Soviet Union has avoided any direct military involvement. The Kremlin—wiser than Washington has been in Vietnam—has not chosen military escalation as the answer to its Middle Eastern difficulties. It has instead given private assurances to Washington that it is prepared to take parallel measures to restore peace to the area. It is up to Moscow now really to work for a stable settlement rather than again seek short-term advantage for itself.

Israel obviously is not going to withdraw from the extensive Arab territories it now holds without solid assurances against resumption of Arab guerrilla warfare and blockade.

There is an opportunity in the new power balance to achieve a lasting Arab-Israel solution that comes to grips with issues of frontiers, refugees, joint development programs and, above all, military stability.

The door to peace in the Middle East can be unlocked if Moscow and Washington will work together to do so, starting with an agreement to halt the arms race in the area that Soviet military aid programs had set in motion.

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