

Today, Soviet commentary displays far less confidence in this regard. Arguably since the NATO rearmament decisions of 1978, and certainly since the election of Ronald Reagan, it has characterized the period as one of a new offensive on the part of imperialist forces led by the United States, an offensive which creates a significant new danger of war.<sup>21</sup> This would suggest a reassessment of US credibility on the part of Soviet writers and a more circumspect appraisal of the risks associated with Soviet military activism in the Third World.

Soviet interests are not homogenous in all regions. Nor are the risks evenly distributed. The Third World can be divided into four types of region from the point of view of the interests of and risks faced by the Soviet Union:

1. areas of vital interest to the Soviet Union where no comparable US interest exists;
2. areas of vital interest to the United States where no comparable Soviet interest exists;
3. areas where the vital interests of the two superpowers intersect;
4. areas where neither power's vital interests are at stake.

Incentives for involvement are highest in areas 1 and 3 and this presumably explains the long history of Soviet emphasis on Middle Eastern and Central Asian states lying along its southern periphery. Areas of the fourth type are attractive in that the potential costs of involvement are not great (as, for example, in Portuguese Southern Africa), but substantial commitments of resources are difficult to justify, given the improbability of significantly valuable returns. Areas of type 2 contain significant temptations, but these are accompanied by a high level of risk.

It is this last category which concerns us here. The most obvious example in the current historical context is the Caribbean Basin. In the light of the preceding discussion, two aspects of the Caribbean Basin are particularly relevant, its position and its politics. First of all, although the area is not significant from the point of view of Soviet defence, it does lie across extremely important US lines of communication. In the event of crisis, the United States would rely on sea lanes passing through the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean for reinforcement and resupply of its forces and of its allies in Europe. Oil from Mexico and Venezuela provides an alternative to dependence on Middle Eastern countries for energy. The transfer

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<sup>21</sup> On this point see MacFarlane, *op.cit.* (note 17), p. 310.