

Survey Sees October War As
Break-through to Stability

(A review of the International Institute of Strategic Studies' annual "Strategic Survey.")

The successful use of the oil weapon by the Arab states in the wake of the October War produced the greatest shock, the most potent sense of a new era, of any event of recent years, says the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies.

This was the first success ever obtained at the highest level of politics by economic sanctions, and the first time that major industrial states had to bow to pressure from pre-industrial ones. It was by far the biggest extension of the world's effective political arena since the Chinese revolution, and it opened up prospects of quite new political balances, according to the Institute's "Strategic Survey 1973," published recently.

With the rise of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the "pentagon" of power in the world proclaimed only two years ago by U.S. President Richard Nixon had become a "hexagon." But it was plain that the oil producers enjoyed one dimension of power to an exceptional degree, but few others.

The energy crisis was not created by the October War, only precipitated. The crisis antedates the war and could outlast a settlement of Arab-Israeli differences. None the less, the force of the oil weapon and the fact that the fantastic growth of Arab oil revenues might ultimately mean that the military balance could turn against Israel, has meant that time is no longer on Israel's side. A settlement should be attempted while Israel still holds strong negotiating cards, the survey notes.

Energy Crisis

Finding some slight prospects for peace in the region, the survey says that "the Middle East war could prove the break-through to a more stable situation in the region, for three reasons. First, there seems to be a shift in the objectives of the leading Arab powers towards accommodation. Second, Israel is no longer as safe as she seemed in relying on her military superiority. Third, the Super Powers seem likely to be driven into an active rather than a passive control of security in the area."

Militarily Israel won the battles, and the report shows how striking this was by comparing the relative forced of each side on the two fronts at the outbreak of war, but "politically the Arabs won the war."

Reviewing the course of the war the survey notes that the initial attacks by Egypt and Syria were very successful, and their soldiers fought with determination and used their weapons with skill. In defense they were resolute and cohesive. "The Arabs were prodigal in their use of equipment, and their sheer numbers had much to do with their early success."

To underscore the force of the Arab assault it is shown that the Syrians used between 900 and 1,200 tanks and perhaps 45,000 men in their attack against an Israeli garrison on 180 tanks and 4,500 men. On the Egyptian front Israel had 600 men on the Bar-Lev Line supported by an armoured brigade with some 240 tanks and a third brigade further back in Sinai. Against this force the Egyptians launched three mechanized divisions later supported by two armoured divisions.

However, the attacking forces failed to press home their initial advantage. "The Syrians quickly lost momentum as they ran on to Israeli anti-tank defences, and the Egyptian operations, inhibited by the safety their ground-based air defences afforded, were slow and deliberate, giving time for Israel to muster her forces... It seemed at the time a close run thing, with Israeli forces on the ground heavily outnumbered and surprised by the effectiveness of their opponents' weapons, and Israeli morale undoubtedly suffered sharply, but recovered later. The tide on the Syrian front was turned by sheer tenacity and skill, and on the Canal front by typical audacity."

Israel was aided by the fact that the Syrians used their tanks poorly in mass frontal attacks that made them easy targets. "Moreover there was little coordination between tanks and infantry so that armoured attacks were usually unsupported." The Egyptian armour was also bunched in attack, and its commanders were not good at coordinating fire and movement. "It was also handicapped by being often outranged by Israel's tanks and always being vulnerable to the Israel Air Force."

The Break-through

In the war, neither Egypt nor Syria succeeded militarily in doing what they set out to do, and Israel was in a much better military position at the time of the second cease-fire. But the Arab forces made the point that they are very expensive to fight, let alone defeat, and their negotiating position as a result has been much improved, factors which could lead to a break-through to a more stable situation in the region.

The intensity of the fighting and the amount and complexity of the equipment used left both sides critically dependent on outside supplies, giving the U.S. and the USSR a heavy mortgage. In contrast to 1967, the war showed the strength of the defence, in particular of anti-tank and anti-aircraft defences.

The war broke the log-jam of fruitless peace efforts since early 1971, and

Egypt and Israel, disabused of purely military solutions, recognised that nothing short of a political settlement could bring stability. The military outcome of the war seemed precisely designed to produce peace negotiations.

The war also demonstrated the limits of the American-Soviet detente, especially after the Russians started resupplying the Arabs on October 10 and the Soviet threat to fly troops into the region on October 24.

The Russians airlifted a total of 15,000 tons of military supplies to the Arabs during the war. The Americans started only three days later, on October 13, but by the war's end had airlifted 22,400 tons of military equipment to Israel on U.S. aircraft, and El Al flew in an additional 5,500 tons. Both Super-Powers also mounted sealifts, but the survey reports that the quantities are not known.

The table of estimated casualties in the war reveals that the Arabs lost ten times as many men as Israel during the fighting. Egypt sustained 15,000 killed and 45,000 injured. Syria, 7,000 killed and 21,000 injured. Israel's losses are put at 2,812 dead and 7,500 injured. The Iraqis are estimated to have lost 125 dead and 260 injured.

The report also notes that the Soviets, who had one adviser attached to each battalion, also lost some of them killed in action.

While Western-made weapons generally proved superior to Soviet equipment used in the war, the surface-to-air equation may be different, especially because of the Sam-6. The Soviet anti-tank missiles were effective, but not more so than Nato weapons and not as good as some being produced in Europe, such as Tow, Hot, or Milan. One of the major lessons of the war, the survey finds, is the need to have sufficiently strong defences to hold any surprise attack until reinforcements arrive.

The war reinforced the need for Israel to have defensible frontiers--particularly in the north where there is little depth. A defence line well beyond the 1967 frontiers would give Israel more comfort, but this means holding areas that in recent history were Arab--"a political luxury that has been costly this time and may be too costly in the future."

Internationally policed demilitarized zones on the Golan Heights and in areas of the West Bank have more obvious attractions for Israel, the Institute believes, than they had before the war.

(An article by David Lennon published in the Jerusalem Post.)