When it comes to our looking at Soviet attitudes towards this part of the world, there is a danger of our making a mistake about perception. The problem is not of erroneous snap decisions but of long term and unmoving illusions about the Soviet Union. If one looks at many of the arguments that have been advanced in the last ten years in academic, journalistic or diplomatic statements or analyses of Soviet policy, many are questionable – that it is a priority of the Soviet Union to acquire warm water ports; that the question of Soviet Moslems is today a major factor in Soviet foreign policy; that the Soviet Union faces the possible threat of an energy crisis comparable to that of the West, necessitating substantial oil imports; and, finally, the view that the Russians ‘blundered’ in Afghanistan. I do not share the view that the Russians ‘blundered’ in Afghanistan. They took a decision in 1979 the consequences of which they foresaw: they have paid a price for it but it was a price which they knew in advance they would pay.

Now of course all of this is said in the context of something which is evident; we do not know what the Russian leadership thinks. The USSR is a country where foreign policy is made by a very restricted group of people – the Politburo is ten, 12 or 13 people, depending on which year its composition is examined. Even within the Politburo the people who actually take foreign policy decisions may be a minority: the General Secretary, Minister of Defence, Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Head of the KGB, perhaps one or two others. We cannot say for sure what they are thinking or why they took certain

* Professor of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science
decisions. We cannot even go over a major Soviet decision like Afghanistan, or their attitude to Iran, in the way we can go over some Western decisions because the documentary evidence is lacking. But despite these limitations I think we can look at what they say and we can look at what they do. On that basis we can at least have some discussions, and question the assumptions that underlie much current analysis.

If the Russians look south, there are two very important points that have to be borne in mind. One is that they do not see the region as a unified whole. They take first what they call Sryednii Vostok, the Middle East or the Central East. These are the countries that border the Soviet Union – Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan – and also countries with which the Russians have a long historic association. This includes the fact that they have fought wars with all these countries in the past and have had fluctuating boundaries with all of them.

At the same time there is the Near East, what they call Blizhnii Vostok, the Arab world, Israel, the Red Sea down to the Horn of Africa, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf – or the non-Iranian part of the Gulf. Their association with this area is more recent and it is much less important to them. The result is that the areas of the Middle East that are vital to the Soviet Union are not necessarily the same areas that are vital to the West. And their response to what happens in those areas is also different.

It is often said, of course, that geography is no longer an important factor in international relations. Certainly, in an era of missiles and satellites it is no longer important in the way it was a century ago. But the question of what one could call the ‘vicinity’ of countries, of being nearby, is very important. In fact it is in some ways more important now that it was in the past because, not just for reasons of strategy but also for reasons of ideology, to have an ideologically distinct and a hostile, even small, country on your frontier is not something the great powers like at all. You only have to look at the Americans in Central America to see that. The same goes for the Russians. So this area bordering them, this Sryednii Vostok area is, because of its vicinity, a very important region and in some ways has become an enhanced area of importance because of the East–West conflict.

One of the general points often raised about Soviet policy is that of economics. For the West the Middle East is a vital area because of economic factors: the supply of oil, the sale of goods and the disposition of petrodollars. The Soviet Union’s trade with the Third World is much less important than the West’s to its economy, and the