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February 6, 1970

Memorandum for the President, "Further Background on the Kosygin Letter"

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Summary:

A memorandum in which Kissinger theorizes on the reasoning behind the Kosygin letter, specifically Brezhnev's anger over an Israeli strike on several Soviet advisors in the region and Soviet frustration over the limited options in their current position.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

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INFORMATION

February 6, 1970

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger HK

SUBJECT: Further Background on the Kosygin Letter

In an earlier memorandum I speculated on the inept position adopted by the Soviets in the Kosygin letter. At the time I thought that perhaps the Soviet reaction reflected internal strains and frustrations in the wake of an exasperating visit with Nasser. The full text of the intercepted conversation between Brezhnev and Defense Minister Grechko seems to confirm this.

Brezhnev was obviously bitter about the Israeli raids, and especially the accuracy of the strike on the house of the Soviet advisers, which he implied was deliberate. His concern, however, was mainly on how to keep the incident quiet and out of the public eye. The conversation also indicates that top Soviet military leaders had been meeting on the Middle East and that Brezhnev had a personal hand in the drafting of the letter to you. Thus, the raid of January 28 may have triggered a Soviet decision to send the letters to you, Pompidou and Wilson to justify a new shipment of Soviet arms.

Brezhnev refers to sending "a system" after first sending "means of defense." The conversation sheds no further light on what kind of weapons might be involved. One interpretation could be that the new system will be offensive weapons (more advanced aircraft or even tactical missiles) but that new radars or surface-to-air missiles will have to be installed first. It could be that both systems are defensive, however. We will watch this closely and prepare a more extensive review of the possibilities in the next few days.

As I noted, the ill-timed demand for a cease-fire played into our hands quite nicely, in view of our efforts in Jerusalem and Cairo. This may be explained by the fact that Brezhnev expected the letters to go forward on that same day (January 29), when in fact they were not delivered

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until January 31, that is, after we had initiated our soundings on a cease-fire. The desire of the top leaders to fire off an immediate demarche may also explain the little thought given to whether a call for a cease-fire would put Nasser in an untenable position either to agree under pressure or turn down Israeli agreement to mutual cessation.

In short, the Soviets seem to be responding emotionally to the killing of Soviet advisers and out of frustration over their inability to do much about the entire state of affairs. This, of course, could have some ominous implications for future moves, since as I noted in my earlier memorandum, the Middle East was a source of internal tensions within the Soviet leadership at the time of the June war. Brezhnev may be worried that his own position is vulnerable to charges of softness, and the letter could have been for the record to protect himself against any new Kremlin debate over Middle East policy. On the other hand, a failure of his initiative may make him even more vulnerable. In this connection, Brezhnev referred to the "nervous strain" of his job, and some trouble with his throat. This is the second time in the last two months that we have noted Brezhnev having health problems.

(K and Jefferson complained of "headaches" every afternoon in his last 3 years as President!)

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