

February 25, 1977

Letter, Secretary Brezhnev to President Carter

Citation:

"Letter, Secretary Brezhnev to President Carter", February 25, 1977, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Russian Foreign Ministry archives, Moscow; translation by Mark H. Doctoroff. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110446>

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Embassy of the USSR in the USA

TOP SECRET

Copy No. 1

Washington, D.C

From the Journal

of DOBRYNIN, A.F.

RECORD OF THE CONVERSATION

with the USA Secretary of State

C. VANCE

February 26, 1977

I met with Secretary of State Vance and asked him to pass on as directed the letter of L.I. Brezhnev of February 25, 1977 to President Carter.

"Dear Mr. President,

I attentively studied your letter of February 14 of this year. I want to talk sincerely about the impression and the ideas which it provoked here in our country. As I understand, you welcome such direct conversation.

The general remarks in favor of peace and curtailment of the arms race which were contained in the letter, of course, coincide with our own aspirations. We are definitely for the ultimate liquidation of nuclear weapons and, moreover, for universal and total disarmament under effective international control.

However, advancement forward toward these elevated goals will not be accelerated, but, on the contrary, will be slowed down, if we first of all do not value what we already managed to accomplish in this area over the last few years, and, second, if we abandon a responsible, realistic approach to determining further concrete steps in favor of introducing proposals which are known to be unacceptable.

Reviewing the ideas which you expressed from this particular angle, we unfortunately did not find in many of them a desire for a constructive approach, or readiness to look for mutually acceptable solutions to the problems which are the subject of exchanges of opinions between us.

As I already wrote to you, we firmly believe that in the first place it is necessary to complete the drafting of a new agreement on limitation of strategic offensive weapons, on the basis of that which was agreed in Vladivostok. The basic parameters of the agreement which were fixed there, as well as additional explanatory statements which were agreed on during subsequent negotiations, were the result of tremendous work. In many cases it was necessary to make difficult decisions in order to find mutually acceptable solutions to an apparently deadlocked situation. And to the extent that this agreement has already been worked out, it is all interconnected-you can not withdraw one important element without destroying the whole foundation.

For example, it is enough to recall that-and you, Mr. President should know this from the documents from the negotiations-that the method of counting MIRVed missiles was precisely determined by the achievement of agreement on the whole complex of cruise missiles. The American side not only agreed to this in principle, but in January of last year a concrete formula for counting ALCM (trans. "air to ground") cruise missiles within the ceilings for strategic weapons was practically agreed. All that was left was to agree on concrete formulas for sea- and land-based cruise missiles. True, the American side later tried to propose the removal of the issue of sea- and

land-based cruise missiles from the main agreement, [but] we categorically rejected such an attempt to break from an already-achieved agreement.

Now it is proposed to us to withdraw the whole question of cruise missiles from the agreement. How should we understand this return to a stage which we moved beyond long ago, and being forced to face this absolutely hopeless proposal? To agree to this proposal would have meant that blocking one channel of the strategic arms race we open another channel at the same time. And does it really matter to people the type of missile by which they will perish—a cruise or a non-cruise one? Nor are there grounds to believe that it will be easier to solve the question on cruise missiles later, when the sides start to deploy them, than now, while they are still being developed. We know from experience that it is not so.

The aspiration to maintain artificial urgency about the issue of the Soviet intermediate bomber called "Backfire" in the USA (which is still the case as we understand from your letter), is in no way consistent with an agreement. Let there be no doubts in this respect: we firmly reject such an approach as being inconsistent with the subject of the negotiations and having only one goal—to make the conclusion of the agreement more complicated or maybe even impossible.

Does the United States really have less of an interest in this agreement than the Soviet Union? We do not believe so, and if someone has a different opinion—it is a serious mistake.

In connection with the question you raised about the possibility of a significant reduction of the levels of strategic forces, which were agreed on in Vladivostok, I would like to remind you that we also did and do stand for stopping of the arms race, including the reduction of strategic forces. This can be proved by the agreement achieved in Vladivostok, which implies for the USSR a unilateral reduction of strategic delivery vehicles. This, not only in words but also in fact actually is a striving for arms reduction.

We are in favor of the results which were achieved in Vladivostok being consolidated in an agreement without further delays, and that we want to move further ahead. As already mentioned, we are ready to start negotiations on next steps, including the question of possible future reductions, straight after the current agreement will be concluded.

Yet, we want to make it clear: any steps of this kind must first of all completely satisfy the principle of equality and equal security of the sides. It seems to us, Mr. President, that nobody can argue with our right to pose the question this way.

How does the idea of a dramatic reduction in the nuclear-missile forces of the USA and the USSR look in this light? In your letter it is put forward in isolation from all other aspects of the present situation. At the same time it is evident that in this case the following factors would have immeasurably grown in importance to the unilateral advantage of the USA: the difference in geographic positions of the sides, the presence of American nuclear means of forward basing and missile-carrying aviation near the territory of the USSR, the fact that the USA NATO allies possess nuclear weapons and other circumstances, which can not but be taken into consideration.

The fact that it is impossible to ignore all these facts while considering the question of reduction of nuclear-missile forces of the USSR and the USA is so obvious that we can not but ask a question: what is the real purpose of putting forward such proposals, which may be superficially attractive to uninformed people, but in fact is directed at gaining unilateral advantages. You yourself justly pointed out that attempts of one side to gain advantage over the other can produce only negative results.

The same one-sidedness reveals itself in proposals on banning of all mobile missiles (i.e. including intermediate range missiles, which have nothing to do with the subject of Soviet-American negotiation), limits on throw weights, on-site inspection.

You of course know better why all these questions are put in such an unconstructive manner. We want to conduct the conversation in a business-like manner from the very beginning, to search for mutually acceptable-I stress, mutually acceptable agreements. The Soviet Union will continue to firmly protect its interests; at the same time a constructive and realistic approach of the American side will always find on our side support and readiness to achieve an agreement. We hope to see exactly this kind of a responsible approach when the Secretary of State Vance comes to Moscow.

This refers to the problem of strategic weapons limitation as well as to other questions, connected with stopping the arms race. We definitely are counting on the American side supporting our proposals, including the proposal to ban creation of new kinds and systems of weapons of mass destruction, to ban chemical weapons, and to conclude a world treaty on non-use of force. Our proposals on this and some other questions, including that of the Indian Ocean, were presented many times and concretely, in particular, in the United Nations. Keeping in mind the interests of international security and strengthening of peace, we could also discuss questions raised in your letter, such as: warning of missile launch tests, reduction of selling and supply of conventional weapons to the "third world" countries, and others.

We give much importance to the agreement on reduction of armed forces and weapons in Central Europe without prejudice to the security of any of the sides.

Yet a one-sided approach is evident as far as your letter and negotiations in Vienna are concerned. This is the only way to treat, for example, the statements that the American side views its positions in regard to the Vienna negotiations with the air of some kind of "concern with excessive increase" of military power in East Europe. Not only is an objective evaluation of the real situation missing here, but also the constructive proposals, which were put forward by the USSR and other countries-participants in the negotiations and directed at achieving progress at the Vienna negotiations, are completely ignored. We are ready now and in the future for a search for solutions and outcomes, a search which does not imply that someone will receive unilateral advantages. But if we are expected to unilaterally reduce our defensive capabilities and thus put ourselves and our allies into an unequal position, such expectations will lead nowhere.

It is impossible to agree with the evaluation of the situation relating to fulfillment of the Four-power agreement which is given in the letter. The USSR never encroached and does not encroach now on the special status of Western Berlin, and the appeal for support in lifting tension in that region is directed to the wrong address. The fact that complications still arise there is connected with the completely definite policy carried out by the FRG with the connivance of three western states, and is which is practically directed at dissolving the Four-powers treaty and its cornerstone resolution-that West Berlin does not belong to the FRG and cannot be governed by it. But the attempts to break this resolution are a very slippery path leading to aggravation of the situation. We believe that the Four-power treaty should be strictly and faultlessly observed by all interested sides, and we will in every way strive to avoid returning to the period when Western Berlin was a constant source of dangerous friction and conflicts.

Without going into details, I will say that your letter does not indicate any changes in the USA approach to such questions as settlement in the Near East or improvement in the sphere of trade-economic relations between our countries, which could bear witness to an intention to move to their successful settlement.

And finally. In the letter the question of so called "human rights" is raised again. Our qualification of the essence of this matter and of the behavior of American Administration in this respect has just been reported through our Ambassador. This is our principle position. We have no intention to enforce our customs on your country or other countries, but we will not allow interference in our internal affairs, no matter what kind of pseudo-humane pretence is used for the purpose. We will firmly react to any attempts of this kind.

And how should we treat such a situation, when the President of the USA sends a letter to the General Secretary of the CC CPSU and at the same time starts the correspondence with a renegade, who proclaimed himself to be an enemy of the Soviet State and who stands against normal, good relations between the USSR and the USA?³ We would not like our patience to be tested while dealing with any matters of foreign policy, including the questions of Soviet-American relations. The Soviet Union must not be dealt with like that.

These are the thoughts, Mr. President, which my colleagues and I had in connection with your letter. I did not choose smooth phrases, though they might have been more pleasant. The things we talk about are too serious to leave space for any kind of ambiguity or reticence.

My letter is a product of sincere concern about the present and future of our relations, and it is this main idea that I want with all directness and trust to bring to you.

I hope that with an understanding of the elevated responsibility which is placed on the leadership of our two countries we will be able to provide the forward development of Soviet-American relations along the way of peace, in the interests of our and all other people.

With respect,
L. Brezhnev
February 25, 1977"

Vance read the text of the letter attentively twice and then said the following.

"Personally I welcome such direct, plain-speaking language of the General Secretary. Our President still approaches certain international problems too lightly. For example, I told him several times, referring to the conversation with you (the Soviet Ambassador) and to the history of negotiations on the whole, that the Soviet government gives very much importance to solving of the question on cruise missiles. He doesn't pay much attention, in his striving to conclude an agreement without long negotiations on remaining contradictory questions, thinking that these questions can be put off for "later." I told him that it is not so, but... (Vance waved his hands to indicate that he did not manage to persuade the President that he was right).

I hope that the direct letter from L.I. Brezhnev, Vance went on, will make the President look at the situation in a somewhat different way.

I, of course, do not fully agree with what is written in the letter, but I hope that it is this kind of letter that the President needs to receive now."⁴(...)

The Ambassador of the USSR in the USA (signature)
/A. Dobrynin/