

Soviet Moves Caused U.S. Military Alert

By Michael Getler

Washington Post Staff Writer

The pre-dawn alert yesterday of American military forces around the world came after 48 hours of puzzling yet potentially dangerous signals that the Soviet Union was planning to intervene unilaterally in the Middle East fighting.

As high-ranking U.S. officials explain it, the first unusual event came on Tuesday when there was a sharp drop-off in the previously heavy Russian airlift of supplies into Egypt and Syria.

At about the same time,

U. S. intelligence reportedly began picking up initial indications that some Russian army and transport units had been placed on alert.

These two events, plus a continuation of the already heavy Soviet sealift of supplies to the war zone, led to the troublesome speculation shared by many top civilian and military officials that the Soviet Union was planning some sort of military move in the Middle East.

It was reasoned that the airlift of cargo had ended abruptly because enough material was under way by

ship and the transport planes were being readied to carry the troops that had been alerted.

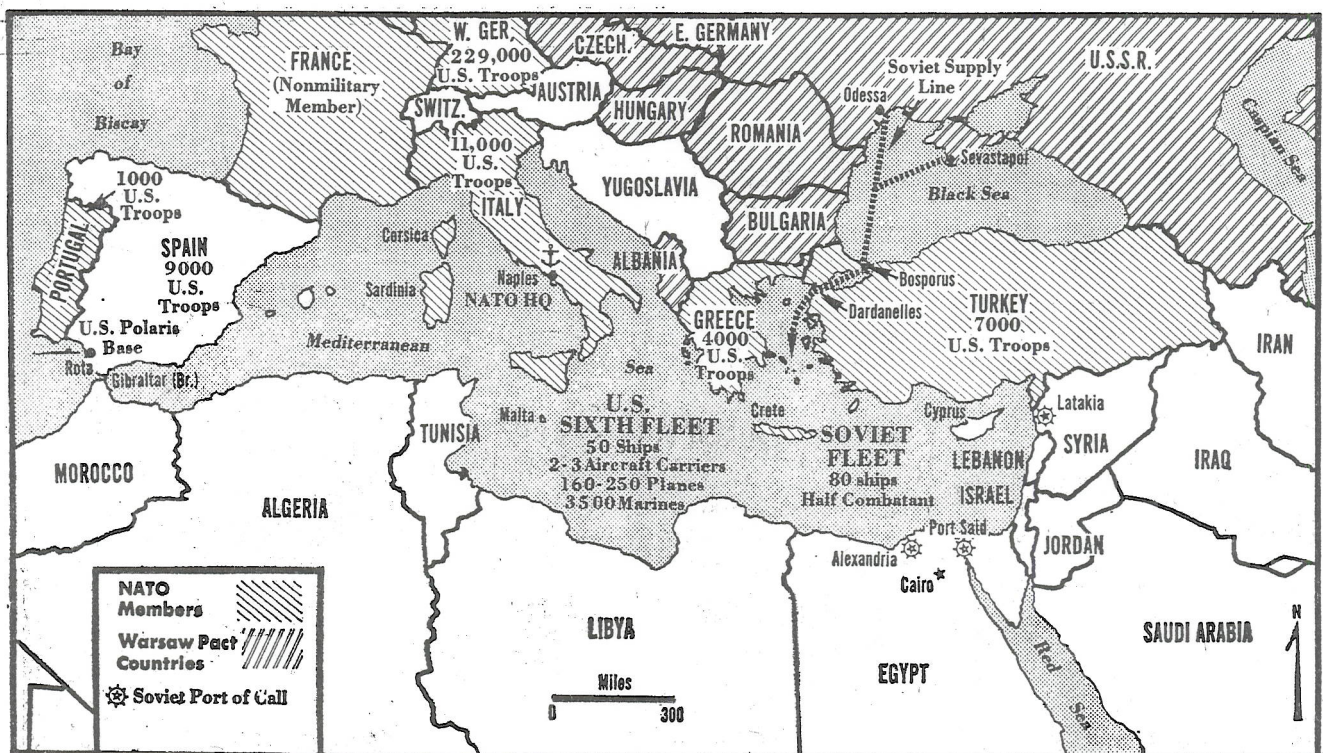
The mood of impending crisis deepened Wednesday when further alerts were detected reportedly involving Russian airborne units. Then flights of "several" of the huge Soviet AN-22 transports were detected heading for Cairo from bases believed to be in Eastern Europe.

The conclusion, however, remained tenuous, until Wednesday night, when Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy F.

Dobrynin delivered what senior officials describe as a "harshly worded" letter from Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to President Nixon, through Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger. The note reportedly warned that Russian troops would be sent to the Middle East in a unilateral action if necessary to enforce the on-again, off-again cease-fire.

The Dobrynin note, in combination with the earlier signals, convinced the Joint Chiefs of Staff and top civilian leaders that Moscow

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might in fact carry out such a move, and resulted in what officials say was the clearest warning the United States could send to the Soviet Union—an alert to all U.S. forces.

The planes en route to Cairo actually landed there. But U.S. officials said they had not determined whether or not they carried troops. As of yesterday, most officials doubted they carried troops, in part because there were insufficient flights to have carried enough troops to make much difference in a battle.

The alert of U.S. forces, which U.S. officials repeatedly stressed was "precautionary" and did not put the country on a war footing, followed meetings of the National Security Council and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The actual order to move to a higher state of readiness went out from the joint chiefs, on orders of the Secretary of Defense, the early hours of Thursday morning.

The alert was to put all forces on fundamentally a standby basis and was far from two much higher levels of alert that would accompany a prelude to all-out war. Principally it meant leaves were canceled, men were ordered to return to their units and be prepared to move out if necessary.

There were some dramatic aspects, however, including the dispatch of a third U.S. attack aircraft carrier, the John F. Kennedy, into the Mediterranean from its post in the Eastern Atlantic, where it had been stationed for several days.

Also, about 50 or 60 B-52 heavy bombers were ordered to return from their base at Guam to the United States. The planes had been part of a 150-plane B-52 force on Guam used during the Vietnam war, but many of the later "G" models of these planes still play a primary role as nuclear-weap-

ons carriers in any U.S.-Soviet confrontation.

At Ft. Bragg, N.C., the 15,000-man 82d Airborne Division, normally alerted first in a crisis, was told to be ready to move if necessary by 6 a.m. Thursday.

Late yesterday, after the U.N. Security Council resolution seemed to rapidly defuse the tense situation by setting up a peace-keeping force without U.S. or Soviet troops, there were strong indications that the U.S. alert would be called off gradually, with selected units put back on normal peacetime footing.

Before the U.N. resolution was passed and at the height of the tension on Tuesday and Wednesday, the situation on the battlefield is what may have prompted the Soviet moves toward intervention.

Arab and possibly Soviet assessments early in the war that Arab forces would do well had clearly begun to crumble by early this week when the Israeli thrust across the Suez Canal split the Egyptian forces in two and trapped the elite Egyptian Third Army.

After an investment of billions of dollars by the Soviet Union in Egypt's military machine, it was faced early this week with the prospect of a severe and embarrassing defeat for the Russian-trained and equipped Egyptian army.

The Israeli reponse to alleged cease-fire violations was to pound the Third Army even harder, grab more territory and further isolate that force. Without some intervention or threat, it may have been felt in Moscow that the Third Army, which is the backbone of the Egyptian ground force, would have been annihilated, carrying with it the message that no amount of Russian help could prevent humiliating defeat by the Israelis.

The United States, however, is also believed to have put pressure on the Israelis

not to annihilate the remainder of the Egyptian force, and all day yesterday it was quiet on the Suez front.

The Third Army, which held the Egyptian southern front on the east bank of the 103-mile canal was initially believed to have some 30,000 to 50,000 men. Yesterday, U.S. sources said the army had been badly mauled, now numbered perhaps 22,000 men, and was surrounded inside the Sinai desert. On the east were Israeli Sinai-based forces and from the west other Israeli armored units recrossed the canal, pushing the Egyptian force further into the desert.

U.S. officials said the Israelis apparently were letting food and water trucks from Cairo through to the Third Army units. The question of what happens to this army presumably will be left to the negotiations that the United States hopes will eventually begin between the Arabs and Israelis.

Yesterday's alert of U.S. forces worldwide is believed to be the first time such an alert was flashed since the 1968 capture of the USS Pueblo by the North Koreans.

In contrast to the 1970 Middle East crisis, in which only selected U.S. units were alerted, yesterday's action applied to all forces — air, sea and ground as well as both conventional and nuclear forces.

The United States has five levels of alert, with the most relaxed being Level 5 and the normal being Level 4.

Yesterday, the U.S. forces were ordered to Level 3, which is a higher state of readiness and which means, for example, that the Strategic Air Command would have more of its pilots ready for duty than under normal circumstances.

U.S. officials say yesterday's dramatic action "had a heavy dose of diplomacy in it."

As they describe it, the apparent imminence of the Soviet intervention made it

mandatory that a strong signal be sent to the Soviet Union which would give its leaders pause, hopefully long enough to get U.N. Security Council action on setting up a peacekeeping force and long enough to bring still more pressure on the Israelis to be restrained militarily.

Aside from direct intervention, the smoldering crisis has had the seeds for big-power confrontation for more than two weeks in the form of steadily growing U.S. and Soviet fleets spread out through the Mediterranean, but concentrated mostly at the eastern end.

The Soviet Union now has close to 80 ships there—a record number — with about half of them combatants and half support and auxiliary vessels.

The U.S. Sixth Fleet now numbers more than 50 vessels, including three attack carriers with about 250 planes in total and two helicopter carriers with a combined load of 3,500 to 4,000 Marines.

In contrast to the U.S. fleet, which has considerable offensive capabilities, the Russian fleet is designed more to do battle with the Sixth Fleet and protect shipping lanes than to put men or planes ashore.

A number of military observers, in fact, view the Russian military situation in the Middle East as not too unlike the problems faced by the Soviet Union in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and in responding to the U.S. mining of North Vietnamese ports in 1972.

Despite the heavy flow of Russian arms to the Middle East, these observers believe the Soviet Union still does not have the kind of conventional striking power that the United States has particularly in the form of long-range fighter-bombers and aircraft carriers—which enables a superpower to fight major battles at great distances from its homeland.