

Story Behind the

New York Times

Washington

The Soviet note that led to a precautionary alert of U.S. forces around the world on the night of October 24 carried an implied threat rather than an actual threat of the dispatch of Soviet troops to the Suez war zone.

"We strongly urge that we both send forces to enforce the cease-fire and, if you do not, we may be obliged to consider acting alone," the Soviet note said, according to two officials who have read it.

A preliminary reconstruction of the events of that night — many of which remain masked in secrecy — shows that the note from Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to President Nixon and the alert ordered by the Nixon administration were only two exchanges in a complicated test of wills over the Middle East.

The exchanges lasted more than 12 hours, according to interviews with U.S. officials and Soviet, Israeli and European diplomats,

but the crucial exchange — delivery of the Brezhnev note and the calling of the alert — took place in less than an hour, approximately between 10:40 and 11:30 p.m.

Only hours before, the Nixon administration had rejected two earlier pleas for a joint U.S.-Soviet expeditionary force to enforce peace on the Suez front.

The first had come from President Anwar-Sadat of Egypt at about 3 p.m. The next, in the form of a note from Brezhnev, had been delivered at about 8 p.m. to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, by Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin.

The crisis that Kissinger faced had been building up for several days.

On October 16, Premier Aleksei Kosygin, on a hasty visit to Egypt, discovered that the Egyptian army, in contrast with Sadat's boasts, was near a state of collapse. In addition, the Egyptian Third Corps, on the east bank of the Suez Canal opposite the city of Suez, faced encirclement by the Israelis as a result of the Israeli

crossing to the western bank early that morning.

Kosygin returned to Moscow October 19 urging that the Soviet government press for an immediate cease-fire in the Middle East war, which was then in its 14th day. Brezhnev thereupon invited Mr. Nixon to send Kissinger to Moscow, and the secretary arrived the next day.

In sessions on October 20 and 21 Kissinger and Brezhnev reached a compromise in which Moscow won its point that no time could be lost in achieving a cease-fire, while the Americans won their point that the cease-fire must be linked to negotiations between the Arabs and Israelis.

The joint cease-fire proposal they agreed upon was adopted by the United Nations Security Council early October 22, and the truce in place officially went into effect about 12 hours later.

Kissinger stopped in Israel on that day on his way home from Moscow. Four hours after he had left, Israeli forces went on to complete their encirclement of the

Egyptian Third Corps, an action he heard about later, reportedly with great dismay and a sense of betrayal.

While the Russians were said to have been outraged at what they regarded as a breach of their October 21 understanding with the Americans, they also saw it as an opportunity to establish a large Soviet presence in the Middle East and they reportedly solicited Sadat's October 24 call for U.S. and Soviet troops.

A U.S. official familiar with the event said the original Brezhnev proposal on October 24 for a joint U.S.-Soviet force for the Middle East made Kissinger apprehensive that tougher moments were ahead.

Kissinger was also getting what he later described as "puzzling" reports from the United Nations. There the Soviet representative, Jacob Malik, had shifted suddenly from demanding a mere reaffirmation of the cease-fire resolution of October 22 — a reaffirmation was voted October 23, and the new truce went into effect Octo-

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ber 24 — to a resolution authorizing an expeditionary force for the Suez region, to a resolution authorizing a U.S. - Soviet expeditionary force.

U.S. intelligence, drawing principally on electronic surveillance of Soviet land, sea and air forces had already noted the presence of seven landing craft and two ships with troop helicopters in eastern Mediterranean waters.

The landing craft had been there before, "milling around" as one intelligence official put it, recalling that a week before there had been eight landing craft in the eastern Mediterranean.

Electronic surveillance had also monitored signals putting seven divisions of Soviet airborne troops — about 49,000 men — on a standby alert. One division had been placed on a higher level of alert during the day, making it ready to move out on call.

But, the intelligence official observed, there had been Soviet alerts before during the Middle East conflict which began October 6,

and more Soviet landing craft in the region. So the activities of Soviet forces on October 24 by themselves had caused no undue alarm at the Defense Department, he said.

Still, the Soviet air force had pulled most of its large transports from Damascus and Cairo to their home bases that day and some Pentagon officials interpreted this as a sign that Moscow might use them to take Soviet troops, rather than Soviet weapons, to the Suez battle zone.

When the second Brezhnev note came at about 10:40 p.m. warning that the Soviet Union "may be obliged to consider acting alone," the responsible American officials — principally Kissinger and Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger — put that together with the electronic intelligence evidence and concluded that the Soviet Union was determined to put troops in the Middle East.

Describing the situation later, one cabinet official involved in the events said of the second note and the in-

telligence estimates, "either one, apart, we could have ignored."

Dobrynin left the second note with Kissinger without obtaining a reply.

The secretary of state immediately telephoned Mr. Nixon who was in his upper floor living quarters in the White House, and suggested the U.S. response should be military as well as political.

Mr. Nixon concurred.

This was the genesis of the U.S. alert.

Mr. Nixon remained in charge throughout, his aides say. But he was also remote, staying the entire night in his White House apartment and receiving the telephone messages of Kissinger and Schlesinger. Mr. Nixon empowered them to manage the crisis on their own, the cabinet official said, leaving them to conceive and carry out the various moves.

Kissinger convened a meeting of what Schlesinger later termed "the abbreviated National Security Council" in the austere, map-filled basement situation room of the White House.

It was abbreviated in part because the chairman of what had been a six-man panel, Mr. Nixon, was upstairs. Kissinger was here in his dual capacity as secretary of state and the President's assistant for national security affairs. There was no vice president of the United States because Spiro T. Agnew had resigned and there was no director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness since George A. Lincoln had retired 14 months before.

"Officially the meeting consisted of Kissinger, Kissinger and Schlesinger," a council aide commented.

Attending as the intelligence adviser was William E. Colby, director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, attended as military adviser.

The abbreviated National Security Council met at about 11 p.m., and Kissinger and Schlesinger swiftly agreed on a modified alert as the U.S. military response designed to persuade the Soviet Union against acting alone.