



The SAC Alert and The Soviet Blink

— Joseph Alsop

THE U.S. Strategic Air Command is on alert around the world as these words are written. At the same time, the entire airborne element of the Soviet forces in western Russia is also on alert at the airfields. But at this instant, the Russians have just "blinked" massively at the United Nations: so one can hope these semi-war warnings will shortly be canceled.

Meanwhile, it is worth having a look at some of the hard facts that have been too widely ignored or wholly unmentioned. To begin with, the Soviet Union sponsored the Egyptian and Syrian attack on Israel. In view of the massive Soviet supplies poured in before the attack, and the undoubted Soviet advance knowledge of the attack itself, "sponsorship" is a most conservative word.

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THE SOVIET UNION made not the smallest effort to bring the fighting to a halt, while the Arab armies seemed to be doing well. On the contrary, personal letters from General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev to King Hussein, King Hassan, and President Habib Bourguiba, urged bringing Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia into the battle immediately.

A sharp change than occurred when the gallant Israeli forces began to do well. The Soviet Ambassador in Cairo initially responded by bullyragging the Egyptian high command to order a further offensive. But the Egyptian attempt to break out of their newly-captured positions along the Suez Canal's east bank, and to seize the vital passes on Sinai's high ground, ended in fearful failure in less than half a day.

Meanwhile, Premier Alexei Kosygin reached Cairo to make his own assessment of the situation on the spot. And the Israelis made their brilliant leap across the Suez Canal, to gain their vital bridgehead on the western or Egyptian bank.

At this stage the Egyptians were apparently somewhat deceived about the cruel new realities, probably because of Arab subordinate officers' almost unvarying habit of optimistically lying to their superiors. Within a couple of days, however, Kosygin could see for himself that the Egyptian situation was desperate. (Naturally, he had his own intelligence sources.)

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THIS LED, in turn, and at once, to the "urgent" near - midnight message from Brezhnev to President Nixon, asking that Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger come to Moscow immediately to discuss a cease-fire. Please note that this proposal was only made when catastrophe for Egypt was at hand.

The Russians immediately accepted Kissinger's offer, showing how grave they thought their clients' plight. What then happened is murky.

The Russians may have thought they could force the Egyptians to accept the same understanding. In any case, the Egyptians broke the cease-fire in an historical and quite fruitless effort to avoid direct negotiations with Israel. Then the Russians threatened direct intervention. So we came to the grim pass of danger that endured from 3 a.m., when the President ordered the SAC alert, until the Soviet "blink" in the afternoon.