

Mideast: The Russian Presence

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 Soviets 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.

To go on, 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 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 then occurred when the gallant Israeli forces began to do well. The Soviet ambassador in Cairo initially responded by bullying 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 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.)

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.

If the fighting had gone their way, and Mr. Nixon had had to beg for a meeting with Brezhnev, the deafest of deaf ears would surely have been turned. It was the old Soviet game of "Heads I Win, Tails You Lose"—for the Soviets of course knew that our damnable petroleum problem, plus the military-strategic effects of our strange, recent national cult of weakness, would inevitably force us to discuss cease-fire as soon as the Soviet clients were in bad trouble.

In Moscow, nonetheless, Kissinger very properly refused the first Soviet offer. This was a cease-fire on the basis of the truce lines prior to the new Arab attack. Kissinger said, instead, that there must be a cease-fire-in-place. He added that the new cease-fire must be combined with prompt Arab face-to-face negotiations of a permanent peace settlement with Israel. This is what the Arabs have flatly refused since 1948.

The Soviets immediately accepted Kissinger's offer, showing how grave they thought their clients' plight. What then happened is murky, except for three things. First, the Soviet-American cease-fire resolution at the U.N. exactly reproduced Kissinger's agreement with Brezhnev. Second, the Israelis accepted what the Soviets had accepted, and they initially observed the cease-fire.

The Soviets may have thought they could force the Egyptians to accept the same understanding, or they may have thought from the first that cheating would be easy. In any case, the Egyptians broke the cease-fire in a histori-

cal and quite fruitless effort to avoid direct negotiations with Israel, with 25,000 men of their army in pawn to the Israeli army. Then the Soviets 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.

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