

CHAPTER 2

Oleg Grinevsky : *The Crisis that
Didn't Erupt:
The Soviet-American
Relationship,
1980–1983*

THE EARLY 1980s were among the most volatile years in Soviet-U.S. relations. They might be equated with the early 1960s, the era of the Berlin and Cuban missile crises. There was no direct U.S.–Soviet confrontation in the 1980s, but international tensions were greatly intensifying, and once again the world could have come to the brink of war. The situation in the Middle East in 1983 almost erupted into a crisis that would have been more difficult to resolve than the crises in either Berlin or Cuba. This occurred not because war was desired and prepared for by the leaders of both superpowers, but because, not knowing and understanding one another, they suspected the worst of each other's intentions. In a fit of temper, Yuri Andropov called the events that led to the Cuban missile crisis a “war of the blind.” Then history repeated itself.

Ronald Reagan's landslide victory in the presidential election of November 1980 did not come as a surprise to Moscow. Under the Carter administration, Soviet-U.S. relations went steadily downhill, and Moscow was prepared for the return to the White House of conservatives who would take a firm stand on foreign policies. The Republican Party defined its goal as achieving military superiority over the Soviet Union so that the United States would be

ready for military action in areas of Soviet vulnerability and able to destroy Soviet military targets.¹ Therefore, the Kremlin prepared for serious complications in its relations with the United States and for a drastic increase in international tension and a growing threat of war.

The Soviet leadership was not particularly interested in Reagan's personality. They thought the new president was merely a provincial actor, a puppet manipulated from behind the scenes by U.S. monopolies and the military-industrial complex. Besides, he was behaving as a "zoological anti-Communist." But that was not their major concern. Sometimes it was rather handy for the Soviet leaders to do business with anti-Communists who took a clear and stable stance. Such was the case with President Richard Nixon, for example.

Uncertainty worried them. What would the policies of the new U.S. administration be like? Would there be a dramatic change of course? Or would the rhetoric of the election campaign be followed by a return to normalcy?

On November 17, 1980, Yuri Andropov and Andrei Gromyko dispatched a report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party in which they proposed contacting Reagan's closest circle of advisers through the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C. They intended to question those who would assume key positions in the administration to learn about their foreign policy views, especially toward the Soviet Union.

It was not difficult to identify members of Reagan's closest circle and learn about their viewpoints. U.S. newspapers were filled with this information, and staff reshuffles in the White House gave rise to heated discussions in the U.S. capital. Therefore, officials of the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C., needed only to read the newspapers and attend receptions to keep informed.

And that is what they did. Moscow started receiving informa-

1. Proceedings and Debates of the 96th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, s10445-s10470.

tion that the key figures in the new administration were Richard Allen, Caspar Weinberger, William Casey, and Alexander Haig. The second and third ranks were filled with members of the four U.S. organizations considered to represent the stronghold of conservatism: the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University, the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., and the Committee on the Present Danger.² These organizations provided the White House not only with people but also with ideas. Sarcastic clerks at the Soviet Union's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the KGB would sometimes refer to them as "brains with [the] screeching of a hawk." Andropov used to define them as ardent anti-Communists and anti-Soviets. Moscow did not expect to have a good rapport with the new team in Washington, and first contacts with the new administration seemed to confirm their expectations.

On January 24, 1981, Secretary of State Alexander Haig dispatched a message to his colleague Andrei Gromyko. It contained tough warnings relating to Soviet policies toward Poland, Afghanistan, and Africa, but problems of Soviet-U.S. negotiations on disarmament and bilateral relations were not even mentioned. Gromyko's immediate response to Haig was cold and instructive. "In our relations, indeed there are many problems, which in fact deserve to be paid foremost attention. One may only regret that these problems, judging by your message, have escaped the new Administration's attention," wrote Gromyko. Then, his response outlined the Soviet position on disarmament.

This exchange coincided with the first press conference given by Haig and Reagan. On January 28, the secretary of state accused the

2. Later, Moscow received information that the Hoover Institution provided the Reagan administration and the U.S. government with 40 people; Georgetown University provided 40; and the American Enterprise Institute and the Committee on the Present Danger provided 32 each. The most famous of them were Richard Pipes (National Security Council), Richard Perle, Fred Ikle, John Lehman (Department of Defense), and Eugene Rostow (Arms Control and Disarmament Agency). Edward Rowny, Paul Nitze, and Richard Staar headed the disarmament negotiations.

Soviet Union of “training, financing, and arming international terrorism,” which implied supporting national liberation movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.³ The next day the president went even further. He called détente “a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to purpose its own aims.” Then he went on to say that Soviet leaders kept declaring at their Communist Party conventions that their ultimate goal was the promotion of world revolution and a global Communist state. They “reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie and to cheat in order to achieve this goal.”⁴

Moscow was shocked. In addition, Ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin reported from Washington, D.C., that Haig told him confidentially that Reagan was “unconditionally committed to [a] sharp increase in military expenditures” to liquidate the “gap between the USA” and the USSR in this area.⁵ Defense Secretary Weinberger said that his mission was “to re-arm America.” More importantly, he declared publicly that the United States would start deploying neutron warheads on their missiles.

The situation sounded serious, and on February 11 the Politburo again discussed relations with the United States. The discussion was surprisingly heated, and everyone reproached Reagan. They concluded that his election meant that the most unbridled forces of imperialism had come to power in the United States.

Dmitri Ustinov and Yuri Andropov raised the alarm. In their public speeches and private communications, they warned that basic U.S. politics were poised for dramatic revision. The warlike statements made by the new president about crusades against communism and accusations of the Soviet Union’s guilt of all the deadly sins were merely a propagandistic background that shielded the development of an aggressive military and strategic course, the essence of which was the new role nuclear weapons were to play.

3. *New York Times*, January 28, 1981.

4. “The President’s News Conference of January 29, 1981,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 17 (February 2, 1981), 66.

5. Anatoli Dobrynin, *Sugubo Doveritel’no: posol v Washyngtone pri shesti prezidentakh SshA, 1962–1986* (Moscow: Avtor, 1996), 504–505.

Even under Nixon, the United States and the Soviet Union had worked out a clear understanding of mutual containment by each side's ability to inflict unacceptable damage upon the other. The understanding that nuclear war was meaningless because no victory was possible was secured by two treaties finalized in Moscow in May 1972. The SALT I and ABM treaties were the foundation of strategic stability in the world for the next dozen years.

By 1980, what had changed? The concept of a limited war, inherited from Carter's presidency, had been updated by Reagan's National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 32, which was based on the possibility of waging a protracted nuclear war with the Soviet Union in which the United States would prevail. The assumption that a nuclear war was not only possible but that the United States would win it laid the foundation for new U.S. defense policies. Huge military budgets and the development of modern weapons were essential elements of these new policies.

This conclusion was supported by the fact that two weeks after Reagan arrived at the White House, he requested Congress to increase the defense budget by \$32.6 billion. Congress readily approved the request, and the new administration launched a program to develop new intercontinental ballistic MX missiles, each equipped with ten multiple warheads, and Trident ballistic missiles based on submarines and also equipped with MIRV warheads. In addition, heavy B-1 bombers and long-range sea- and air-launched cruise missiles were quickly developed.

Minister of Defense Dmitri Fedorovich Ustinov commented on the Pentagon's plans by saying, "This is a rather dangerous turn in the arms race. 100 MX ICBMs is one thousand highly accurate nuclear warheads with 600 kilotons each. This means that the capacity of each warhead is thirty times higher than the one dropped onto Hiroshima." Even more anxiety was raised by Ustinov in connection with U.S. plans to deploy intermediate-range Pershing missiles in Europe:

These American missiles with the range of 2500 km are the first strike weapons. . . . As stated in the Pentagon Directive Order on

Building of the Military Forces of the U.S.A., those are targeted at state and military authorities of the USSR first of all, as well as our intercontinental ballistic missiles and other strategic installations. The flying time of a Pershing II is about 6 minutes, which as the aggressor thinks makes it difficult to prepare for any counter measures. This means we are not talking about a simple arithmetic addition of 600 missiles to the strategic potential of the U.S.A., but about a qualitative change in the overall strategic situation in favor of the United States.⁶

At the time, the Soviet Union did not possess similar weapons. According to intelligence data, Moscow alone was the target of 200 warheads. All of this led to the conclusion that Washington was determined to break the parity and achieve military superiority. Ustinov estimated that by 1990 the United States would have 20,000 warheads.

In this context, it is interesting to compare Ustinov's worries with the concerns of his U.S. colleagues, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey. Strangely enough, they were focused on the same issue, but as a mirrored reflection. This is quite eloquently explained in the CIA Estimate of February 15, 1983, "Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict, 1982-1992," which was declassified in the mid-1990s. It states that the Soviet leaders "seek through strategic and other military programs to continue shifting the military component of the correlation of forces in favor of the USSR and its allies." They "regard . . . nuclear war as a continuing possibility . . . and seek superior capability to fight and win the nuclear war."

Then, using the same phrases employed by the Soviets, the CIA Estimate states that the Soviet Union continued to modernize and deploy highly accurate SS ICBMs (SS-18s and SS-19s with multiple warheads), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (with MIRVs), and long-range Backfire bombers, as well as intermediate-range SS-20 missiles in Europe. In addition, the document contends that

6. *Pravda*, December 7, 1982.

Moscow was active in the development and testing of a new generation of SS-24 and SS-25 missiles, Typhoon-class submarines, and Blackjack and Bear bombers. By the end of 1982, according to U.S. intelligence, the Soviet Union possessed 2,300 ICBMs and SLBMs with 7,300 warheads. By 1990, the number of missiles would increase by 10 to 15 percent, but the number of warheads on them would reach 21,000.⁷

By and large, U.S. and Soviet intelligence arrived at similar estimates. It is regrettable that the leaders of both nations could not peek into one another's intelligence reports, for their anxieties might have been calmed. Why try in vain to destroy parity and unbalance the forces when the ratio would remain the same? By simple arithmetic, the USSR and the United States would each have 20,000 warheads by 1990, so why make a fuss?

There was one difference between Moscow and Washington in their evaluations of the strategic situation. According to recently published documents, the intelligence community of the United States did not have a unified view of the Soviet Union's perspective on waging a nuclear war. Official CIA statements indicated that the USSR sought superior capabilities "to fight and win a nuclear war with the United States." However, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the Department of State assumed that "the Soviets recognize that nuclear war is so destructive, and its course so uncertain, that they could not expect an outcome that was 'favorable' in any meaningful sense."⁸

But Moscow did not have any doubts. It had concluded that Washington sought to shift the balance of forces in its favor so as to perform a surprise nuclear attack first and to reduce the responsive strike from the Soviet Union. The Soviet leadership was serious about preparing for such an inevitable war. Then, as if to play up the fears behind the Kremlin walls, Reagan delivered two con-

7. *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War*, ed. William C. Wohlforth (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 26–27, 306.

8. *Ibid.*, 28, 309.

secutive speeches. In the first, given on March 8, 1983, he declared the Soviet Union the evil empire. Two weeks later, he announced the development of an antimissile shield over America to protect it from this evil empire.

Moscow was racking its brains over why Reagan was making such provocative pronouncements. Not long before, on February 15, the president had invited Soviet ambassador Dobrynin to the White House where they talked for over two hours (an unusually long time for Reagan), proposing to establish good working relations with Moscow. How could one take that proposal seriously when simultaneously Reagan called the Soviet Union the evil empire? How could one accept his proposal to start negotiations on arms reduction when he had announced the necessity of developing new technologies that would ruin the foundation of Soviet military power?

On Andropov's instructions, his aide Andrei Aleksandrov and I had to urgently prepare a reply to Reagan that was published in *Pravda* on March 27. Andropov was in Kuntsevo Hospital at the time, and his first question to us was: "What's . . . Reagan's trick all about? He might be a sincere believer in all those fairy tales about [a] nuclear-free world. But Reagan is an actor, not a politician. But whose scenario is he performing? Who is the scriptwriter? Reagan just could not invent that SDI scheme!" We could not answer those questions, and Andropov was displeased.⁹ He argued:

When the Americans create their anti-missile defense system, the Soviet nuclear weapons will prove outdated. But the American nuclear power will still be up-to-date and efficient. That means the USA is getting an opportunity to get away with the first nuclear strike. The entire geopolitical military stability system, which was

9. The quotes from private conversations throughout this essay are from the author's personal notes and some of them appear in his book *Scenario for World War Three*.

created within the last decades, will be destroyed. The USSR will just stop being a superpower.

The question, however, is whether it is possible, given today's technological know-how, to create a reliable anti-missile defense system, which would shield the whole country. . . . I talked to Ustinov asking him to have a word with his scientific research specialists. According to him they are not sure. It looks like it can't be done now as such a system can be broken by various means. However, in 10–15 years' time the situation might change. But what if not in 10–15 years, but in 5 years? One can't set hopes upon the forecasted time.

Let's sum up. What do we have? The Americans know, and they can't fail to know, that a reliable anti-missile defense system cannot be created now. However, they publicize their plans to create such a system, though in practice it would be neither efficient nor reliable. Why all that masquerade then?

- To intimidate us and use us as a pressing tool?
- To pay out a large sum of money to its military industrial complex and to draw us into the arms race in areas where the U.S. enjoys a considerable technological advantage?
- Or else, according to Ustinov, in order to destabilize the strategic situation, so as to dramatically decrease the Soviet retaliatory strike consequences? Let's imagine the following scenario: the USA delivers a first nuclear strike to the Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile sites. That will weaken our retaliatory strike, which, in its turn, will be partially repulsed by the anti-missile defense system.

The situation is too serious, and I am not going to disregard both of the possible scenarios, even the possibility to create an efficient anti-missile defense system. Irrespective of the fact [of] whether the system is practicable or not, it is a real factor in . . . today's U.S. policies. And we can't ignore it.¹⁰

The discussion had further consequences. Deep in the military-industrial complex, the "adequate responsive measures" were being

10. Oleg Grinevsky, "Spektakl pod nazvaniem Zvezdnye voyny" [The Star Wars Show], *Dipkurier, Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, May 18, 2000.

worked out, and Andropov warned about their importance. Naturally, he did not mention what kind of measures were being readied, to avoid frightening everybody still more, but Andropov demonstrated his concern with gestures: “Creating their anti-missile defense system, Americans will await a strike from . . . outer space [and he waved his hand in a zigzag pattern, showing how missiles will fly from outer space], and we’ll deliver a strike from here [and his hand showed a missile flying from below, evidently from under the water].”

But apparently the Soviet military system did not pin any special hopes on underwater missiles. Therefore, among other “adequate measures,” they were developing the Dead Grip system. If the Americans delivered a surprise first nuclear strike on Moscow, destroying the Soviet capital and killing all the Soviet leaders, what then? The Dead Grip system would provide for an automatic full-power nuclear strike on the United States in the case of even one nuclear explosion in Soviet territory.

Boris Stroganov, head of the Missile and Outer Space Problems Sector at the CPSU Central Committee Defense Department, closely monitored top-secret research. A trial system for early detection and an automatic retaliatory strike was deployed at one of the proving grounds, but luckily the project did not go beyond the development stage. Meanwhile, a secret operation coded RYAN—Nuclear Missile Attack was already in full swing.

In the spring of 1981, on Ustinov and Andropov’s joint initiative, the CPSU Politburo approved a directive to both Soviet intelligence service branches, the KGB and GRU, to collect any evidence of U.S. and NATO plans to launch a surprise attack on the Soviet Union. It was the largest peacetime intelligence operation in Soviet history and it lasted until 1984.

In March 1981, Andropov spoke at the secret All-Union KGB meeting. According to General Viacheslav Sharonin, deputy head of the KGB Counterintelligence Service, special emphasis was put on the aggravation of the international situation and the increased threat of a new war. Andropov said, “The Soviet KGB officers

should learn how to act more purposefully, accurately, and fast. The major objective is not to overlook the enemy's military preparations for a nuclear strike, not to overlook a real threat of a new war." KGB professionals, Sharonin continued, understood Andropov very well. "The main threat was a surprise first strike. To overlook it means to perish. That's why Andropov insisted: don't overlook, don't overlook."¹¹

Special instructions were sent to all chiefs of intelligence stations in the West and some neutral countries directing careful monitoring of all political, military, and intelligence service activities that might indicate preparations for a surprise nuclear attack. Along with intelligence information, such evidence could include lights left on in government offices and military installations at night, mobility of important government officers at unusual times, a dramatic increase in blood donations, and an increase in anti-USSR propaganda. The foreign ministry was kept in the dark about this operation. No cables or directives on it were sent to Soviet ambassadors. It was believed that diplomats were not aware of it, but, in fact, they were. In foreign embassies, diplomats and intelligence service officers lived next door to each other, working on the same team for years, and now and then some of them would complain about needing to check to see if windows were lit up at night. It should be noted that they were skeptical about the operation.¹²

I witnessed a similar episode in London in the summer of 1983. Almost all of the Soviet diplomatic group had gathered at a diplomat's apartment to celebrate, merrily and noisily, someone's birthday. Naturally, alcohol was abundant. In the middle of the celebration, close to midnight, all the intelligence officers got to their feet to say good-bye. They were asked to stay on, but they refused, claiming some urgent task. After a couple of hours, some

11. Viacheslav Sharonin, *Pod kolpakom kontrrazvedki: tainaia podopleka perestroiki* (Moscow: Paleia, 1996), 328–329.

12. Dobrynin, *Sugubo Doveritel'no*, 550–552; Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 586–597.

of them returned. They were met with sarcastic gibes: “Well, have you caught the enemy?” to which they merely shrugged their shoulders and said, “Goddamn’em. Went all over the city again and looked [to see] if the windows were lit up. If they are, there’ll be a war!”

Meanwhile, both the NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries were carrying out maneuvers. Plans for using tactical nuclear weapons, largely in Germany, were being developed, but only on maps, for the time being.

In 1983, the United States carried out Global Shield maneuvers using two important U.S. strategic force components: intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and strategic bombers. On a special signal from the command post, air forces set off to simulate conditional nuclear strikes on targets in the USSR and its allied territories.

Moscow anxiously noted that in scale, length, and volume of the performed operation, the maneuver exceeded all previous such actions. Over 1,000 aircraft and 100,000 military troops participated in it. As if in response, Soiuz-83 secret maneuvers were held in the Soviet Union. The maneuvers simulated delivery of over 100 nuclear strikes on West German territory, with the subsequent advance of the Soviet armed forces to the English Channel.

I then asked Nikolai Ogarkov, head of general staff, if he sincerely believed that such a war would not extend beyond Europe and develop into a global nuclear conflict. “I personally don’t believe in it,” the marshal replied, “but because the Americans speak about a possibility of a limited nuclear war in Europe, I should be ready for it.”

The insanity reached a critical point. NATO nuclear launch maneuvers, or Able Archer maneuvers, as they were called, were held in November 1983. They involved simulated strikes, including nuclear strikes, on 50,000 targets in the Soviet Union. U.S. military bases located around the Soviet Union were put on alert. When Reagan was informed about the forthcoming maneuvers, he called

the situation “a scenario for a sequence of events that could lead to the end of civilization.” Nonetheless, he approved the maneuvers.¹³

Moscow detected the NATO maneuvers and determined that preparation for a nuclear strike was in progress. Soviet troops were also put on alert and strategic bombers carrying nuclear weapons were transferred to East Germany.¹⁴ Several days later, Marshal Ustinov said that a dangerous set of maneuvers held in recent years by the United States and NATO was stirring anxiety. They were carried out on a grand scale and “it gets more and more difficult to differentiate them from real armed forces deployment for aggressive purposes.”¹⁵ In these circumstances, one wrong move was enough to cause a catastrophe.

Since the early 1980s, Soviet foreign policy had been deeply stuck in the quadrangle of Afghanistan, Poland, U.S. missiles in Europe, and Middle Eastern problems. It was already involved in the Afghan war, which would last for almost ten years. Brezhnev grumbled at the military: “What a mess they’ve got into! Can’t cope with a bunch of ragamuffins!”

In Poland, a democratic fomentation was occurring. The Solidarity opposition was gaining more political influence and the Polish government was in panic. “Jaruzelski has become entirely apathetic, Kania drinks a lot,” was Andropov’s report to the Politburo. In short, he said, the Communist regime there is verging on collapse. What should be done?

To the east of the Polish borders, Warsaw Pact maneuvers were continuing, but just as a threat, for the time being. However, Erich Honecker, Todor Zhivkov, and other leaders of Socialist countries demanded that allied forces be sent into Poland, as had been done in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. In Moscow, there was ample sup-

13. Desmond Ball and Robert C. Toth, “Revising the SIOP,” *International Security*, Spring 1990; and Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 585–586.

14. *Novosti Razvedki i Kontrrazvedki* 2: 1998, 14.

15. *Pravda*, November 19, 1983.

port for this scenario, including that of the powerful Andropov. But Ustinov and Gromyko were not prepared for such decisive action and they managed to convince Brezhnev that bringing in the troops was not yet necessary.

On September 15, 1981, the Politburo discussed an express-coded cable from Petr Abrasimov, the Soviet ambassador in Berlin, about Honecker's suggestion to summon immediately leaders of the "fraternal parties" for a meeting to decide on sending in the troops. However, the Politburo determined at that time not to bring the armed forces into Poland. Ustinov voted definitely against the proposal and argued that the Poles were not prepared to invite the Soviet troops.

Upon his return from meeting at the foreign ministry, Gromyko spent a long time silently pacing back and forth in his office. Then he enigmatically pronounced, "Afghanistan saved Poland. The Poles should thank Allah in their churches!"

The crisis had passed. The situation did not progress beyond the introduction of martial law, and the situation in Poland stabilized itself without the interference of Soviet armed forces, but tension remained.

The situation was much worse with medium-range missile deployment in Europe. In the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union started to replace the obsolete SS-4 and SS-5 missiles with new three-headed Pioneer missiles. In the West they were referred to with the impersonal label SS-20. However, replacement was not the only problem. The number of missiles grew from year to year, and Europeans, especially West Germans, were raising the alarm and asking what was happening and what the goal was for such a mass deployment of Soviet missiles in Europe.

Their nervousness was well founded. Sharp tongues in the foreign ministry told a story about Brezhnev and Ustinov personally crawling on all fours around a map of Western Europe that was spread out on the floor in the general secretary's office and measuring the areas of the prospective nuclear strikes with the help of a pair of compasses. Their conclusion was that it would take only 20

nuclear warheads to demolish human society there. In fact, there were already 360 Pioneer missiles with 1,080 nuclear warheads deployed in Europe by the end of 1983.¹⁶

Early in the 1980s, the Middle East became the center of the USSR-U.S. geostrategic competition. It had first surfaced during the U.S. election campaign in 1979. Reagan outlined his foreign policy objectives, saying that America's major concern was to prevent the Middle East from falling under Soviet domination. This was not just another fight for a piece of the globe. Had the Soviet Union managed to gain domination in the Middle East and consequently to control all of that area's oil resources, it would have been a threat to the economies of the major industrially developed countries. The ability of NATO and Japan to resist Soviet pressure would have been "seriously damaged," and almost surely that would have led to "Western Europe and Japan taking a neutral position." That would have meant a blow for the United States as well, as inevitably it would have been isolated. For greater emphasis, Reagan added, "The Soviet navy is currently furrowing the waters of the Mediterranean." In short, the United States was challenging the Soviet Union in the Middle East, and Moscow was prepared to meet the challenge.

In the middle of February 1981, a representative Soviet delegation headed by Admiral Nikolai Smirnov, first deputy of the commander-in-chief of the Soviet navy, arrived in Damascus. For many years, every time a new weapons contract was under negotiation with Syria, the Soviet military raised the issue of setting up a base in Syria. Syrians had deftly evaded the question and the decision was postponed, but during negotiations in Moscow on November 8, 1980, President Hafez al-Asad unexpectedly gave his consent. Consequently, Admiral Smirnov's delegation had to choose a location for the Soviet military base in Syria. They carefully explored the entire coastline and decided on a spacious area between Latakia

16. Yuli Kvitsinski, *Vremia i sluchai: zametki professionala* (Moscow: Olma-Press, 1999), 346.

and Tartus. The spot was perfect for a naval base, and it had an area behind it to build an airfield for base air cover. The admiral reported that construction would take only six months. In addition, deep in Syria to the west of Deir-Az-Zor, construction of another air base for Soviet long-range aircraft was being planned. Of course, it was the Soviets' understanding of the geostrategic situation, not Syria's security, that motivated them to build these military bases.

The Soviet Union was on the offense. But for the first time in Soviet—and possibly Russian—history, the enemy was across the ocean. That required a radical change in strategy, switching priorities from land forces to weapons that could defeat the enemy thousands of kilometers from Soviet borders. Hence, the navy took on a new role.

Obviously, the Soviet military could not compete with the United States in the number of bases in the Mediterranean. However, in their opinion, setting up a base with an airfield in Tartus would provide a number of strategic advantages to the Soviet Union, including the following:

1. It was in close proximity to both Bosphorus and Gibraltar. The Soviet navy in the Mediterranean could control access to these straits of strategic importance.
2. It created a powerful counterbalance to U.S. bases and weapons, including nuclear missiles, in the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. The United States had expanded and modernized its military base at Diego Garcia Island in the Indian Ocean and had bases in Egypt, Oman, Somalia, and Kenya. The U.S. Sixth Fleet was there with its 20 warships, including two aircraft carriers and five submarines. In the Indian Ocean they had a group of rapid deployment forces consisting of an aircraft carrier, three submarines, and a dozen other ships constantly controlling the approach to the Persian Gulf.
3. The Soviets believed that their influence in the Middle East would increase. The oil factor was critical as the ability to

block oil deliveries from the region to the United States and Western Europe could seriously influence the entire situation in the West.

However, the Syrians had something different in mind. Their consent to the Soviet Union to set up military bases was not the result of their concern about Soviet geostrategic interests. Rather, they wanted to shield Syria with Soviet missiles in case of a war with Israel. Therefore, President Asad put forward the condition that the Soviet Union should deploy two regiments of their air defense missile systems along the Syrian-Israeli border and one regiment around Damascus to protect the Syrian capital. The missiles were to be serviced by the Soviet military.

The Soviet defense ministry supported the idea. However, Ustinov's optimism was met with an ambiguous reaction from other members of the Politburo. The potential for war in the Middle East was becoming stronger. Gromyko preferred to be cautious. Andropov held a more radical position, but he did not actively promote it. He said:

USSR-USA strategic parity made any direct conflict between them pointless and absurd as both the parties will be simply annihilated in the nuclear war. As to the borders of confrontation they are strictly outlined in Europe and in the Far East—they must not be crossed. Therefore, the struggle takes place only when and where any direct conflict between them can be avoided. So it happens in the so-called "third world"—Asian, African and Middle East countries. People there are starting to oppose imperialism, and our duty is to help them. That's why we need bases and the fleet operating in the ocean, as our buttresses to provide that help.

However, Leonid Brezhnev was growing increasingly frail and he had little interest in bases. After the invasion of Afghanistan, he generally avoided radical changes in politics. The creation of Soviet military bases in Syria and Asad's provisions were not discussed at Politburo meetings, and the decision was simply postponed.

Everything changed in the summer of 1982 after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. President Asad, frightened by the bloody assault on Beirut, paid two secret visits to Moscow. Now it was he who asked for the deployment of Soviet air defense missile systems and air forces in Syria. He assured the Soviet Union that he was ready to provide it with naval and air bases without any conditions. Defense Minister Ustinov held one-on-one talks with him, and on October 18 an agreement to deploy two Soviet air defense missile regiments along with Soviet military personnel was signed at the defense ministry on Frunze Street in Moscow. The foreign ministry was cut off from the negotiations, and even Gromyko was not informed about the contents of the agreement. However, Moscow's concerns lay elsewhere. Brezhnev's days were numbered, and the Kremlin was busy with a secret struggle for power.

Meanwhile, the Soviet missile deployment in Syria was in full swing. The first Soviet troop carrier arrived at the port of Latakia on January 10, 1983. The other five troop carriers arrived several days later. All the military troops wore civilian clothes and looked like tourists. Air Defense Regiment #231 with long-range anti-aircraft missiles was deployed near Dumeira, 40 kilometers west of Damascus. By February 1, Anti-aircraft Regiment #220 with long-range missiles was deployed 5 kilometers east of Homs. A technical support regiment arrived in one of Damascus's suburbs. Helicopter detachments for radio-electronic operations were deployed at a military aerodrome in the capital, and similar ground units were placed in the Golan Heights and the Bekaa Valley. S-200 (SAM-5) missiles, launched from Syria, could cover all of Lebanon and a major part of Israel, which made it possible to bring down Israeli aircraft there.

There were no regular Soviet units in Lebanon and Syria. However, there were numerous military advisers and specialists in Syrian military units and headquarters. They even participated personally in military operations, and their losses amounted to 200 injured and 13 killed. The total number of Soviet troops in Syria was now reaching the level of 8,000 servicemen.

However, disenchantment set in rapidly. Clouds were gathering on the international horizon, and the Kremlin feared that a storm might break out in the Middle East. Wars were amazingly regular there, erupting every eight or nine years (1948, 1956, 1964, and 1973), but the Soviet Union had not been directly involved in them. On the contrary, they allowed the USSR to consolidate its influence in the area. Now, however, not only Soviet missiles but also Soviet servicemen could be in danger. Those whose mission it was to protect Syria found themselves unprotected. Their special concern was not the prospect of an air strike on Soviet missiles but ground operations by the Israeli army. Those missiles were protected by a handful of Soviet soldiers and were, in fact, defenseless. Syrian or Palestinian units could not be relied upon. To prevent an attack on Soviet missiles and the capture of Soviet soldiers by Israel, many generals of the defense ministry and general staff, with Ustinov's support, suggested drastic plans ranging from making threatening statements and saber rattling to sending Soviet troops to Syria. However, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, head of general staff, bluntly discounted these ideas, saying:

Under no circumstances can we provide communication lines and service support to that grouping. On the ground, they are cut off by Turkey—a member of NATO. It can immediately block the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, and the U.S. Sixth Fleet will block the access to Lebanon and Syria in the Mediterranean Sea. What should we do then—should we try to break through Turkey causing the start of World War III? Or should we leave the Soviet troops there to be disgracefully defeated and taken prisoners?

Ogarkov managed to win the battle. Andropov and Gromyko supported him, and Ustinov chose not to protest. But the question about what should be done remained.

The possibility of delivering a nuclear strike to the Dimona Nuclear Research Center in Israel's Negev Desert was discussed at the general staff meeting early in June 1983. The meeting was presided over by General Sergei Akhromeev, who was then deputy head of

general staff. He warned from the beginning that the discussion was one of an operational hypothesis with its advantages and disadvantages. Such a strike would not result in many victims, but Israeli nuclear power would be annihilated, and that would encourage the Arabs to consolidate and enter the war with a united front. Israel would be demoralized and deprived of its main weapon, which would predetermine its defeat. The negative aspects of the hypothesis, according to Akhromeev, included the risk of the Soviet Union's involvement in a nuclear world war, although he thought it very unlikely.

The foreign ministry strongly objected to the idea of striking Israel, arguing that the action would be very dangerous, especially for the Soviet Union. That operation would not rescue a handful of Soviet soldiers in Lebanon but rather would leave them to the mercy of fate. The use of nuclear weapons would lead to a disastrous conflict in the Middle East. The United States would support Israel and the Arabs would withdraw. Would the next step be confrontation with the United States? The Soviet Union would face an unacceptable dilemma: either to admit its defeat as the aggressor that had used a nuclear weapon first, or to launch a nuclear war and risk its consequences, including the annihilation of their country.

No decision was made, but Moscow received alarming information through KGB and GRU channels about possible provocation to directly involve the Soviet Union in the Middle East conflict. The provocation was expected from both Arabs and Israel, and there were serious grounds for such scenarios.

After the bloody developments in Beirut, Washington sent U.S. marines to Lebanon, where they, in alliance with French troops, acted as peacemakers. They were separated from the Soviet soldiers by only about 50 kilometers. At that time, Lebanon appeared to be a boiling pot of civil war where everyone was fighting. U.S. marines were also gradually dragged into the struggle. In mid-September, they delivered the first artillery strike on targets in Lebanese territory controlled by Syria. The Syrians warned that henceforth they would retaliate.

Things went from bad to worse. On October 23, 1983, a five-ton truck broke the barrier at the gates of the U.S. barracks in Beirut not far from the airport, and the driver blew himself up in the vehicle stuffed with 300 kilos of explosives. In the attack, 239 marines perished. Suspicion focused on Shia Muslims, who operated from the Lebanese territory controlled by Syria, and Washington threatened to retaliate. The U.S. media warned that new bombardment and shelling might lead to Soviet military deaths, "which in its turn might lead to serious U.S.-Soviet confrontation." Former deputy secretary of state James Ball warned that a strike on Soviet missiles in Syria might become a "scenario for Third World War."¹⁷ Therefore it is not surprising that in the summer and fall of 1983, every Politburo meeting included discussions, in one form or another, of the issues connected with the Middle East situation.

A decision to transfer missiles to Syria and to withdraw Soviet military personnel by the summer of 1984 was taken in April 1983, but it failed to calm tensions. Troops and missiles were still there, and the information from the Middle East grew more and more alarming, so the Politburo kept discussing these uneasy issues.

Once again, at the Politburo meeting held on July 7, one of the major issues on the agenda was the situation in the Middle East. Andropov outlined it as follows:

Some time ago we made an error, when we sent our air defense missile systems to Syria together with the military servicemen. We were caught in a trap. Irrespective of our supplies of the most modern weapons to Syria, it stands in fact no chance to defeat Israel. Therefore, whether our detachment commander there will carry out the Syrian order to launch missiles or not, Arabs will lay the whole blame of Syrian defeat on the Soviet Union. The situation might turn still worse for us, if we are drawn into the conflict directly. Then there might be far more serious consequences.

Although on a small scale, today's situation in the Middle East looks like the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Of course, both the scale

17. See, for example, *New York Times*, October 19, 1983.

and the enemy are different. But the danger of our being involved in a Syria-Israel armed conflict exists as not only our missiles are under a threat of being attacked, but our people, too.

I know that at working levels here, plans for possible military actions are being developed. Forget them. Some measures have already been taken to minimize the risk of our involvement in the conflict, and we were quite firm talking to Syrians that in the case of . . . war with Israel they should rely on themselves.

Now we need to define our strategies for the future. In short, I mean caution and restraint. The priority should be carrying out the Politburo decision to transfer the Soviet missiles to Syria and withdraw our military personnel from that country. The sooner, the better.

We have to be adamant in our policy to prevent an Israel-Syria military conflict, first of all, using political tools. In case of an Israeli attack, we should examine possibilities of some demonstrative actions to induce the USA and Israel to be reserved. But whatever the developments are, we should not overstep the limits of direct involvement in the military actions.

After Andropov's speech at the Politburo meeting, the decision was made to accept these considerations:

In the case of the conflict extension to Syrian territory, to examine a possibility of using some demonstrative actions in order to induce the USA, and Israel through them, to be reserved. Our measures should not overstep the limits of direct involvement in the military actions.¹⁸

But along with direct involvement, there was always the risk of chance events, especially in an atmosphere fraught with suspicion and tense nerves.

On August 31, 1983, Korean airliner KAL-007 began its usual flight from New York to Seoul by way of Anchorage, Alaska. For reasons that are still unknown, it strayed 500 kilometers off course

18. Politburo Decision P115 /Y1, July 7, 1983.

and flew for several hours over Kamchatka and Sakhalin, penetrating Soviet airspace. Computer simulation of the flight performed by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) of the United Nations revealed that three minutes after the airliner took off from Anchorage, the automatic pilot was on. The airliner followed a straight course although, according to the flight plan, it should have changed course on nine occasions. The trig navigation system showed a side deviation to the right of the route, but the pilots took no measures to correct it. The only explanation, as expressed by the ICAO, was that the flight crew had flown a great deal in the previous weeks and had crossed many time zones, thus their attention, concentration, and judgment had suffered. The Korean pilots who were members of the ICAO commission acknowledged that pilots should not fly under such conditions.

However, on September 1, at 4:51 A.M., Kamchatka time, Soviet radar in Kamchatka spotted the Korean airliner and marked it as target 60-65. The target did not respond to queries but steadily headed toward the USSR's state borders. The anti-aircraft defense officers on duty identified it first as an American KC-135 tanker plane, and later as an RC-135 reconnaissance plane.

What is interesting is that one hour before, the same radar had identified and monitored target 60-64, which was maneuvering north of Karaginski Island and was also failing to answer queries. It was an American RC-135 reconnaissance plane. Later, the United States Department of Defense admitted that the plane was observing Soviet missile tests and anti-aircraft defense activities in Kamchatka as part of the Cobra Dane program.

At some point, the two airplanes were only 75 miles away from each other. As they approached each other, their tracking marks fully merged on Soviet radar screens, and they flew next to each other for about ten minutes. Then one of the planes turned around and set course for Alaska while the other kept flying toward Kamchatka.

At 5:30 A.M., that plane entered USSR territorial airspace. General Kamenski, the anti-aircraft defense commander in the Far East

Military District, reported to the general staff in Moscow that an American military reconnaissance plane had penetrated Soviet airspace. Moscow responded with instructions to try to force the plane to land, and, if that failed, to follow existing operational procedures.

Further decisions were taken by the local air command in the Far East. Fighter planes took off to intercept the airliner, but to no avail. The intruder simply did not react to their signals and warnings, and within half an hour left Soviet airspace. However, it was still heading directly to Sakhalin.

Then ten fighters took off. Soon Soviet fighter pilot Lieutenant Colonel Gennadi Osipovich got lucky. The target, a large aircraft with its lights and flashers on, was in front of him. Nonetheless, the pilot insisted that he “never thought for a moment” that he was following a civilian airliner. “The trouble for all Soviet pilots is that we do not study civilian aircraft belonging to foreign companies,” said Osipovich many years later. He fired several warning shots in an attempt to force the plane to land. As the intruder did not react, he fired two missiles. One of them hit the target, and the Korean Boeing started a rapid descent. Within approximately 12 minutes, it crashed into the sea.¹⁹

On the morning of September 1, Secretary of State George Shultz made a harsh statement accusing Soviet authorities of a barbarous international assault on an unarmed civilian passenger plane. Pronouncing those words, the secretary of state was surely playing by cold war rules. He would later write in his memoirs that he had not realized that neither he nor the president had complete information. Only on the day after the event did the CIA and the NSA acknowledge that the Soviets may have believed the plane to be a reconnaissance intruder.²⁰

19. The 1993 ICAO report confirmed that the decision to shoot was based on Soviet error in believing the aircraft to be a U.S. reconnaissance intruder, not willful or deliberate action against a civilian airliner. (*New York Times*, June 16, 1993, A7; *Izvestia*, October 9, 1993).

20. George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 361–367.

This, however, was not the whole truth. In the famous speech in which he accused the Soviet Union of a “murderous attack,” President Reagan, for greater impact, played part of the tape recording of intercepted communications in which the Soviet pilot pronounced those famous words: “The target is destroyed.” But he did not play other parts of the tape in which the pilot repeatedly attempted to communicate with the airliner, including the use of signals with cannon fire. It was later revealed that President Reagan had been intentionally provided with an incomplete and partially edited recording of the Soviet pilot’s intercepted communications.²¹

As Seymour Hersh, a journalist who conducted a thorough investigation of the incident, bitterly remarked, there was “a frightening irony in all this: the President of the United States, relying on information that was wholly inaccurate and misleading, was accusing the other side of telling lies and was perceived as being moderate in so doing.”²²

Another question is still unanswered. How could the U.S. anti-aircraft defense have overlooked the Korean airliner’s noticeable deviation from the international airway and failed to warn it? If they really did not notice anything that night, then, according to U.S. journalist David Pearson, it was “the worst failure of the American early warning and communications systems, command, management, and intelligence in the entire history of the United States.”²³

However, this explanation would not justify the Soviet Union’s action resulting in the death of innocent passengers on the Korean airliner. Moscow was worried about whether or not to admit that the Soviet Union had shot down the civilian airliner. Ustinov

21. Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994), 118–121.

22. Seymour Hersh, *The Target Is Destroyed* (New York: Random House, 1986), 131.

23. David Pearson, “K.A.L. 007: What the U.S. Knew and When We Knew It,” *The Nation*, August 18–25, 1984, 97.

sternly warned everyone: "Keep silent! The Americans can prove nothing." Andropov, who had just been admitted to Kuntsevo Hospital, washed his hands of it, saying, "Sort it out without me." Gromyko maintained his usual position of not sticking his neck out and did not argue with Ustinov.

As a result, an absurd TASS statement appeared on September 2 with the message that the Soviet Union was unaware that any aircraft had been shot down in its airspace. After that, unintelligible prattle continued for several more days. In the end, TASS admitted that an "unidentified plane" had been warned by Soviet fighters and had flown away in the direction of the sea. Obviously, that statement only added to the worldwide condemnation of the Soviet Union's actions.

The Korean airliner incident showed the deep distrust between the USSR and the United States. Each party was ready to think the worst of the other. For Washington, it was a vivid illustration of the Soviet Union as evil empire, and for Moscow, it was just more evidence of U.S. imperialistic policies, espionage, and exploitation of human emotions in conjunction with the tragic loss of life. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that Soviet-U.S. relations deteriorated further.

One week after the attack on the Korean airliner, Gromyko and Shultz met in Madrid. The meeting was timed to coincide with the end of the marathon Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). As initially conceived, the meeting of the two ministers was intended to outline the first steps to improve Soviet-U.S. relations, most especially in their negotiations on intercontinental and medium-range missiles. If they were successful, then talks between Andropov and Reagan could be held late in the fall.

The disastrous incident with the Korean airliner halted all progress. At the National Security Council meeting of September 2, there was a lengthy discussion about whether the Madrid meeting was necessary at all. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and others suggested canceling it. However, Shultz insisted on the meeting and President Reagan supported him. They compromised,

proposing that the meeting should be held but lunch would not be served, and the talks with Gromyko would be restricted to three topics: the Korean airliner, human rights, and the Soviet Union's default of its obligations on the disarmament agreements.

Moscow also questioned the necessity of the meeting. Those hesitations originated with Gromyko himself, who expected that the conversation with Shultz would be harsh and unpleasant with uncertain results. But Andropov said: "The meeting should be held. Let the Americans, if they wish, break the ties. Then it will be their entire fault. But you should take a firm stand in Madrid."

In his usual manner, Gromyko did not argue. As envisaged by the itinerary, he went to the U.S. ambassador's residence in Madrid, where over 200 reporters had gathered on the front lawn. However, breaking common protocol rules, Shultz did not meet his guest at the door. The negotiating table was empty, although earlier plans had called for lunch to be served. No cups of coffee, no glasses of water, not even paper or pencils were in sight. The Americans thereby showed their dissatisfaction with the Soviet position.

Gromyko did not blink an eye but simply set his jaw and frowned. Shultz coldly invited him into a small office, styled as a library, for a tête-à-tête. There he announced immediately and without diplomatic courtesy that he wanted to discuss the problems of the Korean airliner and the release of the Soviet dissident Anatoli Shcharansky. Gromyko balked and said that he would not discuss those issues as they concerned Soviet internal affairs. Shultz would not budge and announced that he only intended to discuss those two topics according to his president's instructions. Gromyko immediately countered, saying: "The commission given to you as the secretary of state does not oblige me as a representative of another state to follow the American president's instructions. Are you going to discuss those issues on your own?"

Several minutes later, their faces flushed with anger, Shultz and Gromyko left the embassy library and joined the advisers sitting at the empty dinner table, but the discussion continued in the same manner there. Gromyko said that he had already clearly explained

in their private conversation that he did not intend to discuss the issues of the Korean airliner and Shcharansky, and if Shultz insisted, there was no point in continuing. As if to confirm his determination, the minister collected his papers and stood up to leave. Shultz also stood up abruptly and headed to the door. For a moment, it seemed that the imposing secretary of state intended to block Gromyko's way, but instead, Shultz threw the door open and said brusquely, "If you're going to leave, fine. Go."

However, Gromyko did not leave, but went on talking as he paced back and forth. For several minutes he and Shultz exchanged sharp verbal lunges. Each insisted on his own opinion and did not want to listen to the other. At last they agreed to let everyone discuss whatever they wanted. Gromyko sat down and started to explain the Soviet Union's position on the prevention of a nuclear war. Shultz sat silently with a gloomy expression on his face. When Gromyko finished, the U.S. secretary of state started to talk about the Soviet attack on the defenseless Korean airliner. Now it was Gromyko who kept silent. That game lasted for two hours. Gromyko commented later: "It was probably the most harsh of the talks I have held with the fourteen U.S. secretaries of state for many years."

Gromyko returned from Madrid in a gloomy mood. He paced the length of his enormous office for a long time and then said, "Something has to be undertaken. . . . Otherwise, everything will fall apart."

Relations between the two superpowers seriously deteriorated that uneasy September. Along with many other reasons discussed in this chapter was the collision of two stubborn idealists—the ardent anti-Communist Ronald Reagan and the no less ardent champion of Communist ideas, Yuri Andropov. Here were two outstanding personalities, two firm characters, two deep believers.

As a result, Soviet-U.S. relations were strained to the extreme. For the first time in his long career as foreign minister, Gromyko canceled his annual trip to New York to attend the UN General

Assembly session. On the same day, President Reagan made a series of harsh speeches condemning the Soviet Union.

Just a few days after the U.S. invasion of Grenada, Reagan remarked to the Heritage Foundation that containing Soviet expansion was not enough. He declared, "We must go on the offensive with a forward strategy for freedom. . . . The struggle now going on in the world is essentially the struggle between . . . what is right and what is wrong."²⁴ The measured policy framework of seeking a dialogue set forth by Shultz in June seemed to have disappeared.

For Moscow, this Reagan speech sounded like a declaration of war on the third world, at least. But Andropov was even harsher in his response. In his opinion, the United States had become a "country obsessed with . . . unprecedented militarist paranoia," and he accused Reagan of "extreme adventurism." This statement, made on September 28, represented the first authoritative overall evaluation of the Reagan administration's policy. Andropov stressed that this "militarist course represents a serious threat to peace. Its essence is to try to ensure a dominant position in the world." He concluded: "If anyone had any illusions about the possibility of an evolution for the better in the policy of the present American administration, recent events have dispelled them once and for all. . . . Reagan's administration goes so far in their imperialist ambitions that one starts to doubt if Washington has any brakes available and [is] able to keep them from crossing the line, at which any reasonable person will stop."²⁵

Pope John Paul II commented on the situation by saying that the postwar era had entered "a new prewar phase."

Only one positive event occurred that autumn. An agreement was reached in Madrid to convene a conference on disarmament in Europe. Its first phase, devoted to the development of measures

24. Heritage Foundation, October 3, 1983, *Presidential Documents* 19 (October 10, 1983), 1383–84.

25. *Pravda*, September 28, 1983.

to create mutual trust and security in Europe, was to be held in Stockholm. And as history has shown, it was the first step in the right direction. Three years later, the agreement on security and confidence-building measures was reached in Stockholm. This agreement removed the veil of secrecy over the military activity of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact and, for the first time, put in place an on-site inspection regime. The improvements in mutual trust that grew out of this agreement paved the way for the conclusion of the INF treaty, under which all U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces were eliminated; the treaty on deep reduction of the conventional forces of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact (the CFE treaty); and the treaty on a 50 percent reduction of the strategic nuclear forces of the United States and the Soviet Union (START-1). With these agreements in place—as well as major changes in other aspects of U.S.-Soviet relations herein discussed—the cold war ended.