

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: August 18, 1969

SUBJECT: China: US Reaction to Soviet Destruction of CPR Nuclear Capability; Significance of Latest Sino-Soviet Border Clash; Internal Opposition. Vietnam: US and Communist Intentions; Soviet Views. SALT: Reason for Soviet Delay. Laos: Soviet Role.

PARTICIPANTS: Boris N. Davydov, Second Secretary of the Soviet Embassy
William L. Stearman, Special Assistant for North Vietnam, INR/REA

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The reported conversation was during lunch at the Hotel America (Beef and Bird Restaurant) in Washington on August 18, 1969. Davydov, whom I have known for several years, was the host. Expectedly, he began the conversation with questions on our Vietnam policy, but quickly changed the subject to China with a rather startling line of questioning.

China

Davydov introduced this subject by asking about our intentions towards China. Specifically he wanted to know if recent US moves to improve relations with the CPR were aimed at an ultimate Sino-American collusion against the USSR. I assured him that this was not the case and that the modest steps we are taking to improve relations with China should certainly not be interpreted this way. I told him that his knowledge of both the US and China ought really to rule out, in his mind, any serious possibility of such collusion. Davydov had posed this question in a previous conversation; so it was no surprise. His next question, however, was totally unexpected and has not, to my knowledge, ever been raised by the Soviets with any other US officials.

Davydov asked point blank what the US would do if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China's nuclear installations. I replied by asking him if he really meant this to be a serious question. He assured me that he was completely serious and went on to elaborate. He said, in essence, that two objectives would be served by destroying China's nuclear capability. First, the Chinese nuclear threat would be eliminated for decades. Second, such a

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blow would so weaken and discredit the "Mao clique" that dissident senior officers and Party cadres could gain ascendancy in Peking. He pointed out that the Cultural Revolution proved there was a great deal of internal dissent in China and that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the policies of Mao and Lin Piao. (He later added that basic changes could only be made by people in the upper levels of the Army and Party and not by any regional revolt of minority groups or "tribesmen.") He then rephrased his original question by asking: "What would the US do if Peking called for US assistance in the event Chinese nuclear installations were attacked by us? Wouldn't the US try to take advantage of this situation?"

I replied that I was obviously in no position to predict exactly what the US would do in such a hypothetical contingency, but added that one could count on two things. One, the US would view any outbreak of major hostilities between the USSR and China with considerable concern as no one could predict the consequences. Two, the US would most certainly want to keep out of any such conflict. Davydov insisted that a strike against the nuclear facilities would not affect the US and there was nothing to fear from this; furthermore, he believed that this would not cause the Chinese to attack the Soviet Union because they would fear a more massive Soviet attack in retaliation and because Mao's position would be weakened by this blow.

At this point I asked Davydov whether he thought Chinese nuclear capability could ever come close to that of the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future. He answered that in the not too distant future this capability could become a serious threat to the Soviet Union. He reminded me that there was a time when the US seriously doubted the ability of the Soviet Union to catch up with it in the nuclear field and look what happened.

He again sought to elicit information on how we envisage the development of US-CPR relations. I told him that, at the present pace, it might be some time before these relations reached the present formal level of Soviet-Chinese relations. After all, these two countries still maintain diplomatic relations and, malgré tout, recently concluded an agreement on river navigation. Davydov said that the maintenance of embassies in the respective capitals wasn't that significant and that Chinese behavior during the recent river navigation talks had been curious. At one point the Chinese broke off the talks without explanation and then resumed them a day later.

I asked him about the significance of the most recent border clashes, and he explained that this encounter with a "mob of peasants" on the Sinkiang border had nothing to do with the Soviet transportation network and could not be related to Chinese nuclear installations in Sinkiang. In general he felt that all of these border clashes were provoked by the Chinese to detract attention from internal problems. He said that Chinese border guards had been provoking their Soviet counterparts since 1963 when there were even instances

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of the Chinese biting Soviet guards. The Damansky Island "provocation" was the last straw as far as the Soviets were concerned, and the Chinese had to be shown that they couldn't continue to get away with these acts. He inferred that there was a certain advantage to the Soviet Union in these provocations by saying that he actually feared the day when the Chinese began putting on a reasonable, peaceful front behind which they could quietly continue increasing their nuclear strength without raising any alarm.

Coming back to US reaction to the destruction of Chinese nuclear installations, Davydov asked if the US wouldn't really welcome this move since Chinese nuclear weapons could threaten it too; furthermore, the US was supposed to oppose the spread of nuclear weapons. I answered that while we very much favor limiting the number of nuclear powers through the NPT, an attack on Chinese nuclear installations was quite another thing altogether.

Vietnam

Davydov said he felt that the "other side" was interested in a ceasefire and that their very presence in Paris inferred this. I indicated that this was interesting and asked under what conditions they would want a cease-fire. He replied that they would probably want a tacit cease-fire which, at a minimum, would require the rapid and complete withdrawal of US forces and hopefully would also include our agreement to a coalition government. I told him I didn't find this prospect very attractive and that he must know our position well enough to realize that this is unacceptable. He then asked why we hadn't resumed private talks in Paris since these have produced more in the past than the public sessions. I told him that more important than the form of the talks is the willingness of the other side to match our concessions with some concessions of their own. So far, I added, this willingness has been absent.

I then asked Davydov whether or not the Soviet Union was really interested in helping the US achieve an equitable settlement of the war. He replied that there were certain advantages to the Soviet Union in having a war going on near China. On the other hand, the US, as "everybody" agrees, has lost the war, and the Soviet Union is interested in letting the US withdraw from Vietnam in a manner which will not leave it bitter and angry. He went on to say that President Nixon must have a great desire to be in office on the country's 200th anniversary and would make any concession in respect to Vietnam necessary to get re-elected in 1972. I told him that he was sadly mistaken to believe that the President's Vietnam policy was primarily tailored to get him re-elected; furthermore, even if it were he would lose more than he gained by making concessions which would result in a betrayal of South Vietnam and in a vain expenditure of so many American lives and resources.

Most of the rest of the conversation on Vietnam consisted of familiar arguments which hardly merit inclusion in this memorandum. Davydov's parting remarks on this subject were to the effect that once the Soviet Union has

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By EG NARA Date 1/18/77

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fulfilled its obligation toward its North Vietnamese ally, it will have little interest in Southeast Asia which is too remote, unlike the warm, more comfortable Mediterranean area.

SALT

When asked why the Soviets were delaying the beginning of SALT, Davydov explained that they were ready for these talks under the last administration, but the present administration had them postponed. Now the Soviets were doing the same thing as "a kind of diplomatic nonsense." In addition to this, however, the Soviet side is concerned about this administration's "package" approach to the talks and does not want them tied to political issues. He added that Moscow believes the US is sufficiently interested in these talks to divorce them from other matters; so he was optimistic that they would begin before too long.

Laos

In the discussion on Vietnam Davydov pointed out that the Soviet Union is living up to its obligations in Laos. I replied that unless one were reasonably sure the Soviets were doing all they could to persuade Hanoi to withdraw North Vietnamese Army troops from Laos, one has to question his statement. He indicated that there were limits to Soviet influence in Hanoi, but he did not say that any attempts were being made to get Hanoi to respect the Laos agreements.

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