

36. Memorandum From Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan¹

Washington, undated

SUBJECT

Immediate Critical Choices in Foreign Policy

The success and future viability of your Presidency will be determined by foreign policy decisions you must make in the next few weeks. We are, right now, faced with several challenges from the Soviets and their surrogates which cannot be ignored or wished away. We did not seek the confrontation but we cannot now shirk it. If we respond with strength, wisdom, and skill, we will have set the stage for a decade of stability and peace. If we fail to respond—or respond with weakness—the Reagan Presidency will be marked by the same deterioration of international stability and the resulting loss of domestic support that brought Richard Nixon, Jerry Ford, and Jimmy Carter to their knees.

In April of 1969 Richard Nixon faced the first test of his Presidency when North Korea shot down an unarmed EC-121 aircraft over international waters.² Henry Kissinger, whose own involvement in the U.S. response to that crisis prevents him from acknowledging the full magnitude of the disaster, nevertheless does say that:

I judge our conduct in the EC-121 crisis as weak, indecisive and disorganized—though it was much praised then. I believe we paid for it in many intangible ways, in demoralized friends and emboldened adversaries.³

My own judgment is even harsher than that. I believe that our failure to respond adequately to that clear provocation set the course of the Soviet Union and its proxies for the duration of the Nixon Administration, a course that was, in the final analysis, more damaging

¹ Source: Department of State, Executive Secretariat, S/S-I Records, Lawrence S. Eagleburger Subject File: Lot 84D204, Chron—March 1981. Top Secret; Sensitive. Drafted by Eagleburger on March 16. Printed from an unsigned and uninitialed copy.

² On April 14, 1969, a North Korean aircraft shot down a U.S. Navy EC-121 over international waters. For documentation about the incident, see *Foreign Relations, 1969–1976*, vol. XIX, Part 1, Korea, 1969–1972, Documents 1–44.

³ The full quotation by Kissinger reads: “Overall, I judge our conduct in the EC-121 crisis as weak, indecisive, and disorganized—though it was much praised then. I believe we paid for it in many intangible ways, in demoralized friends and emboldened adversaries. Luckily, it happened early and on a relatively peripheral issue. And the lessons we learned benefited our handling of later crises.” (Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 321)

than Watergate. The timidity that we displayed at that time invited new provocations elsewhere, particularly in Vietnam, that we were forced to deal with from an increasing position of weakness. Having displayed our inability to confront the Soviets and their allies on the ground with anything more than the business-as-usual incrementalism which marked the McNamara approach to Vietnam, Nixon was forced to deal with the Soviet Union on highly unfavorable terms—including the signing of an unsatisfactory SALT treaty.⁴

The challenge today is more fundamental, and far broader. The world is waiting—friends and enemies alike—to see whether the United States will have the ability to confront the Soviets when there are costs involved. Great hopes have been placed on the new Administration, and on you personally, Mr. President, to reverse the retreat of the Free World in the face of the advances that the Soviet Union and its proxies have made over the last decade.

The Soviet invasion and continuing occupation of Afghanistan is the most flagrant and obvious manifestation of this move to encircle and divide its potential opponents, in the East as well as the West. However, Afghanistan was not the isolated episode that the Carter Administration sought to portray it as. It was a continuation of an historic trend of increasingly bold Soviet adventurism, continuing from the end of World War II through Vietnam and into the beginning of the Carter Presidency with the Ethiopian adventure.⁵ Carter's failure to respond to this, the first instance of Soviet combat advisers being dispatched overseas, set the course of his disastrous relations with the Soviet Union.

The Soviets not only continue to occupy Afghanistan, but the increasing challenges continue. During the transition to your Presidency we have seen an unprecedented intervention by Cuba and other Soviet proxies in our own hemisphere. And after your inauguration the Soviets broke new ground with the dispatch of advisers to Chad, not in support of the government in power but in support of a Libyan invasion of an innocent neighbor.⁶

Because the hopes for your Presidency are so great, the consequences will be even more momentous if we fail or if we permit ourselves to

⁴Nixon visited the Soviet Union May 22–30, 1972, for the Moscow Summit, at which he and Brezhnev signed the SALT I treaty on May 26. The text of the Interim Agreement Between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America on Certain Measures With Respect to the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms is printed in *Foreign Relations, 1969–1976*, vol. XXXII, SALT I, 1969–1972, Document 317.

⁵Reference is to Soviet and Cuban intervention on behalf of Ethiopia during the Ogaden war.

⁶Reference is to Qadhafi's January attempts to annex Chad. Documentation is scheduled for publication in *Foreign Relations, 1981–1988*, vol. XLVIII, Libya; Chad.

be bullied into a “business as usual” pattern of behavior. The world might believe that the weakness of the Carter Administration could be corrected with an election, and that possibility must also have instilled the Soviets with some caution. But if *this* Administration, with *this* electoral mandate, cannot restore the United States to a position of world leadership, there will be no more hope that someone else might do the job four years from now. The hopes of our friends will be dashed; the ambitions of our enemies will become boundless. And the world could unravel with a speed that would make the events of the last decade seem benign by comparison.

You must very soon decide how the United States will respond to Soviet-inspired proxy adventurism, whether it be in Chad, El Salvador, Angola, Ethiopia, or elsewhere.

The USSR

The common denominator in each case is the USSR; thus you must begin by insisting that all members of your Administration follow a course best calculated to send Moscow signals of our determination to resist its challenge. We are, clearly, *not yet ready to decide how we proceed with the USSR over the longer term*. Too much has yet to be studied and decided. Above all, relative military trends must be reversed. We still have a strategic edge over the Soviets; but it is an edge that, no matter what we do, will be eroded by the middle of the decade. Today we can still deal with the Russians with some confidence that their perception of our military advantages will lead them to fall back when confronted. We may not have that card in our deck by 1985.

In these circumstances *we must not take steps now that will foreclose options or make achievement of your goals over the next several years more difficult*. It would, for example, be a *major tactical and strategic error to lift the grain embargo now*.⁷ The embargo was certainly an inadequate response to the strategic challenge of Afghanistan, and the broader challenge of Soviet and proxy adventurism. *But it was the only meaningful U.S. response*. To withdraw it now—with no new and more serious response in place—would signify the end of U.S. censure of Soviet behavior in Afghanistan, might well invite increased pressure on Poland, and would raise serious doubts about the will of the United States to confront the Soviets when there are costs involved. It would bring the concept of linkage into doubt at the outset of your Administration, and thoroughly confuse our Allies, who might well respond by relaxing their already minimal trade restrictions against the USSR.

Facing up to the Soviet proxy challenge cannot be postponed to a time when we have thought through the broader question of our relations with the

⁷ See footnote 5, Document 4.

Soviets. Indeed, how we respond to this adventurism will determine the future course of our relations with Moscow.

Cuba

The most obvious immediate issue you and your new Administration must face is how to respond to Cuban interventionism, most recently in El Salvador.⁸

We have been trying, through the interdepartmental process, to prepare for you a range of possible political and military responses to Cuban aggression. We have failed. So long as we leave it to the bureaucracy—no matter at what level—to recommend courses of action, we will get just what we now have: an insipid set of incremental steps that are, at one and the same time, too cautious and too dangerous. The modest steps suggested would demonstrate weakness and indecision, thereby sending our opponents a clear signal of our own weakness, while inviting an escalatory response. We, in turn, would then have to escalate, etc., etc. That is how we got into—and lost—Vietnam.

Cuba has been the Soviet instrument for intervention in Angola, Ethiopia, and now El Salvador. In every previous case we have chosen to object but not to act. This time, however, we have begun to counter-attack in El Salvador. That effort must continue, but *we must carry the El Salvador battle to its source: Cuba*. Nor should we restrict our response wholly to this Hemisphere (discussed below). And to do that we must be prepared to act decisively politically, economically, and militarily. We must be prepared to demonstrate to the Cubans and Soviets that we are deadly serious through the imposition of a series of calculated steps ranging from diplomatic initiatives with Latin American and European Governments (which will leak) through strengthening our land, sea, and air forces in the Southeast United States, to the imposition of a blockade if necessary, and, finally, to a willingness to use force to carry out the blockade if we must.

⁸ On February 17, Haig testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Soviet Union, Cuba, Ethiopia, and Vietnam had supplied arms to the insurgents in El Salvador. (Bernard Gwertzman, "More Salvador Aid Backed in Congress: Key Legislators Voice Support for Increase After Haig Briefings," *New York Times*, February 18, 1981, pp. A1, A3) The Department of State, on February 19, provided select foreign embassies with a memorandum outlining collaboration between the insurgents and the various members of the Soviet bloc. (Juan deOnis, "U.S. Says Salvador is 'Textbook Case' of Communist Plot," *New York Times*, February 20, 1981, pp. A1, A5) The Department later released a public version in the form of a memorandum entitled "Communist Interference in El Salvador," on February 23. (Juan deOnis, "State Dept. Says Salvador Rebels Get Fewer Arms," *New York Times*, February 24, 1981, pp. A1, A9) The text of the report, also referenced as Special Report No. 80, is printed in Department of State *Bulletin*, March 1981, pp. 1–7. For Haig's description of the report and its reception, see *Caveat*, pp. 139–140.

Our objective ought to be to force Castro to foreswear intervention, whether in Central America or elsewhere, and to bring his troops home. I do not suggest that decisive action on our part would be cost-free. It would not. In the best of circumstances we would *pay a price*—temporary though it might be—in the Third World and initially with some of our Allies. And if our early threatening moves do not bring the desired results, then escalation must be inevitable, with all that would mean in terms of potential confrontation, allied concern, and domestic opposition.

But the cards are not all stacked against us. Cuba is an island off our shores, not a land-mass bordering on a neighbor ready to supply arms. It is engaged in propping up governments far from its own shores, against strong internal opposition. It is the Soviets and their proxies who have the supply and communications problem—and the political liability of suppressing internal opposition. And finally, it is the Soviet Union and Cuba who, when they see we are serious, will be put on the defensive, with the possibility that Moscow will tell Castro that he is on his own. And, should that happen, it is likely that Castro will blink before we have carried our threats very far.

Soviet flexibility right now is sharply limited because of the deep involvement in Afghanistan, events in Poland, an economy in deep and growing trouble, the continuing Chinese threat, and centrifugal pressures in Eastern Europe. Moscow will be hard pressed to respond with vigor. Dobrynin's recent remarks to me about Cuba suggest that *the Soviets are prepared, within certain limits, to see us reply to Castro's provocations without becoming directly involved themselves*. Thus, it is my belief that we have substantial room to maneuver against Cuba before the Soviets will feel forced to respond with much more than a propaganda campaign.

Libya

Qadhafi poses an equally real threat to the stability of the West. His intervention in the Chad, now augmented by Soviet advisers, presages a *campaign of subversion in Northern Africa* that poses another and related major challenge to vital Western interests. *Here, too, we must act*. But in this case, *we have others who will act with us. The French, Sadat, and perhaps the British have had enough*. Working with and through them, perhaps with the French and Egyptians in the lead, we can develop a scenario for reversing recent trends in and around Libya. Our objective would be to remove Qadhafi from power; our contribution to the common effort would be materiel support, but *limited direct involvement*.

There is an additional benefit, other than the obvious one, to acting against Qadhafi. It is already clear that there can be no solution, or substantial movement, for now to the Arab-Israeli problem; we are faced with some months of stalemate in the best of circumstances.

And we are also faced with a nervous Western Europe that will surely take steps before the year is out that will strengthen the international role of the PLO, thereby making Arafat all the more intractable. Action against Qadhafi would deflect preoccupation in the area with the Israeli issue, while strengthening Sadat, the Saudis, and Israel at the same time.

Conclusion

I propose, not a direct confrontation with Moscow, but a series of measures aimed at forcing Moscow's two most dangerous non-bloc proxies to cease and desist their incitement and support for revolution, whether it be in Central America, the Caribbean, Angola, Ethiopia, Chad or elsewhere. Cuba and Libya must be stopped now; if we delay today we will have to face them tomorrow, at far greater cost, and from a position of growing weakness.

But confrontation there might be, although I personally believe the Soviets will back off when confronted by a determined United States. If we are to show that determination we will have to act with skill on a range of issues including, but not limited to, Cuba and Libya. We will need an integrated program that includes support for Pakistan and the Afghan freedom fighters, makes effective use of the Egyptians, the French, the Israelis and others of like mind on Libya, and involves those in Latin America such as Argentina, Brazil, and Peru, who share our view on Cuba.

I would like to discuss with you the specific steps I have in mind. Thereafter, if you agree, I would ask that you instruct Cap Weinberger and Bill Casey to work with me in establishing several highly secret task forces to flesh out the details of operational political, economic, and military plans to implement the strategy I have described.

I would also like your authority to discuss with the French, and with President Sadat, the Israelis, and the Saudis, while on my Middle East trip, our thinking on Libya.⁹

In the meantime, I will be seeing Dobrynin soon, and will make it clear to him that whatever we do with regard to the challenges Moscow and Havana have imposed upon us will be a case of the punishment fitting the crime.¹⁰ Equally, I will emphasize that we have carrots as well as sticks available, and that Soviet moderation will be rewarded appropriately. But I will also make it clear that *challenges by Soviet surrogates will be met in kind, that the USSR cannot escape*

⁹ See footnote 2, Document 34.

¹⁰ Haig and Dobrynin met on March 24. In telegram 79809 to Moscow, March 28, the Department transmitted a summary of the meeting and talking points. The telegram is printed in *Foreign Relations, 1981–1988*, vol. III, Soviet Union, January 1981–January 1983, Document 35.

responsibility for its indirect acts any more than for what it does directly, and that the course of U.S.-Soviet relations over the coming years will be determined by Moscow's conduct.

That must be our strong and consistent message to Moscow and to those who do Moscow's bidding. But a message without acts is an empty gesture that but proves the weakness of will of the messenger. You, and your country, will be judged in the years to come by how you act now.