

19 October 1973

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT : Moscow and the Middle East

Kosygin's just-completed trip to Cairo is a mark of the high-stakes Moscow has in the Middle East war. It is not merely a matter of whether US or Soviet clients come out ahead on the battlefield. Nor is it only an avoidance of confrontation between US and Soviet forces in the area, although this obviously has been important for some time. Rather, the Soviets must consider what impact the war and their reaction to it will have on detente. Furthermore, they must consider not only how the US administration will feel about detente when the war is over, but how the US public and Congress will feel about it.

Soviet conduct in the period immediately before the outbreak of war and over the past 12 days points up the problem Moscow has in trying to preserve the essential features of detente while strengthening (or at least not harming) its own position in the Middle East. By the end of September, the Soviets probably had a general idea that Egypt and Syria were considering initiating hostilities. [redacted]

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[redacted] that Moscow considered an attack imminent, and even then it probably did not know of the precise timing. The first decision Moscow had to make dur-

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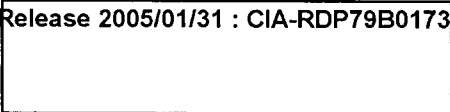
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First Soviet reactions once the war had started were cautious. Almost all Soviet naval ships were removed from Arab ports. A government statement on 8 October took a moderate line on the conflict and Brezhnev, at a luncheon for visiting Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka the same day, stressed Soviet willingness to work for an early end to the fighting.

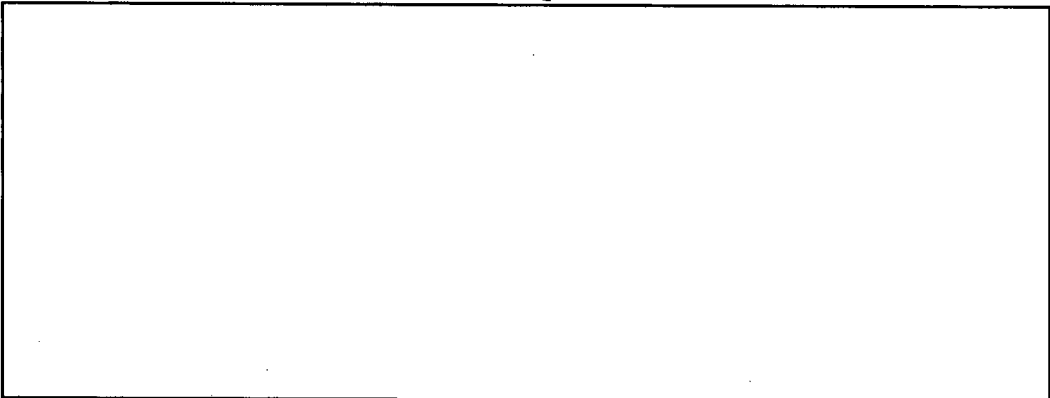
After three days of fighting, however, the Arab side had shown there would be no quick and easy Israeli victory this time. The Soviet resupply effort, which got under way on the 10th, guaranteed that the Soviets would not be excluded from what appeared likely to be at least a moral victory for the Arabs.

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The Soviets took some other actions designed to place themselves more firmly on the Arab side.



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At the same time, the Soviets have shown some clear signs of restraint. With very few exceptions, the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron has remained well back from the war zone. It has been augmented over the past week and currently has more ships than ever before, but only three of the new ships are combatants and two of those are fulfilling a long-scheduled visit to Italian ports.

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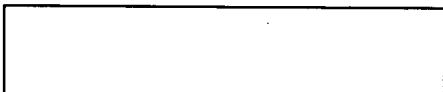
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Soviet public commentaries--whether by top leaders or the media--have been generally moderate and have treated over-all relations with the US as normal even since the US resupply airlift to Israel was announced. Perhaps most significant, Premier Kosygin was sent to Cairo, at least to begin the kind of consultations that will be necessary for an end to the fighting.

The war continues, however, and any turn it may take will confront Moscow with some difficult choices.

Prolonged indecisive fighting would mean more demands for Soviet replacement equipment, and Israel, in



desperation, might try to stop or at least hinder Soviet deliveries. Moscow would have to discontinue support, accept the loss of its own men and materiel, or provide military cover for its deliveries, thereby risking direct US involvement. In the broader perspective, a prolonged war would put a growing strain on elite attitudes toward detente-- and therefore on the possibilities of sustaining it--in both the USSR and the US. For the Soviet leadership, and Brezhnev especially, both audiences are important; Soviet supporters of detente must also be concerned that the freedom of action of the US administration to provide the benefits of detente will be restricted.

If Egypt and Syria began to prevail, perhaps after Israel is exhausted by a long and costly battle in the Sinai, Moscow would be put in a very difficult situation. The Soviets must reckon on a decisive US reaction to rescue Israel. If this were threatened, the Soviets almost certainly would stand aside. We believe that Moscow, which has repeatedly said that its support for Arab efforts to regain lost lands extends only to the 1967 borders, would cut off its aid in the face of an Arab victory that threatened to overrun Israel. More important, the USSR would have to make it clear to the Arabs that it could no longer be counted on to balance off US intervention. It would recognize not only that its restraint would cost heavily in Arab capitals, but also that an overwhelming Arab victory would reduce Arab dependence on the USSR and sharply increase the Arab nationalism that has already bedeviled Soviet-Arab relations.

If Israel swept deep into Arab territory and threatened to destroy the Arab armies, the problems facing the Soviet leadership would be about as difficult as in the case of an Arab victory. The Arabs would press for more Soviet aid and probably combat personnel. They would charge betrayal if their demands were not met; and Moscow could count on China

to magnify the charges and give them a wider audience. We doubt that even under these conditions the Soviets would commit sizable combat forces. We think it possible, however, that, time permitting, Soviet air defense personnel--including fighter pilots--would take a more active role. Even limited Soviet involvement in combat, however, would be preceded by warnings to the US intended to get Israel to ease off, and the time available for effective Soviet intervention could be extremely short.

An early end to the fighting would avoid many risks for the USSR. It would eliminate the risk of direct involvement and offer the best prospect for a resumption of detente. It would leave the US subject to continuing diplomatic and economic pressure from the Arabs, and the Soviets would expect to reap the benefits of post-war frictions between the US, other major oil consumers, and non-Arab Moslem states.

In the Middle East itself, the Soviets probably would expect to see their position somewhat enhanced. Their military assistance would be seen to have been effective. Syria and Egypt would still be dependent on Soviet military aid. If the terms for ending the fighting specified a Soviet role in guaranteeing the cease-fire, their position in the region would be further solidified.

Against this, the Arab reaction to a relatively evenhanded cease-fire would be one much more of pride in their own military accomplishments than of gratitude for Soviet aid. The sense of having erased old humiliation by their own efforts would predominate. Their attitude toward the USSR would be more favorable than at the time when Sadat expelled the Soviet advisers, although not nearly as receptive to Soviet influence as it was in the period of maximum dependence after the 1967 defeat. Having made their military point, in the ensuing political struggle the Arabs would look more to their own resources--including the oil weapon--than to Soviet aid.

While we think the Soviets are interested in a cease-fire, what they can or will do to bring it about

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