

Chapter VII, "Again Missed Opportunities," from forthcoming *The Cold War: Testimony of a Participant*, Georgiy Korniyenko

The fact that, toward the end of the Ford presidency, Soviet-American relations seemed to have been set back meant that the Soviet leadership would be particularly interested in his opponent in the 1976 elections, Jimmy Carter. And although he was a political figure who was completely unknown in the USSR, and although his pre-election statements, as Moscow fully realized, did not necessarily reflect his real views, many of his statements favorably influenced the mood of the Soviet leadership. These included his critical view of Ford's refusal to use the term "detente," his criticism of Ford for putting on ice the negotiations to conclude SALT-2 on the basis of the 1974 Vladivostok accords, and his statements in favor of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and a complete ban on testing, and in favor of reductions in nuclear weapons and their abolition. A positive impression on the Soviet leadership was produced by the fact that Carter not only publicly but also privately, through A. Harriman during a visit to Moscow in September 1976, gave assurances that if elected President he would take steps toward the rapid conclusion and signing of the SALT-2 Treaty, and then would be ready to continue negotiations on an agreement on substantial reductions in strategic weapons.

Of course, not everything Carter said in the election campaign pleased Moscow, in particular the stress he put on human rights internationally, first of all regarding the Soviet Union. But with regard to his statements on arms control and disarmament, I repeat, they gave cause for hope.

In any case, there were no regrets in Moscow over Ford's defeat and Carter's victory in the elections on November 2, 1976. In congratulating the latter on his victory, L.I. Brezhnev immediately expressed the hope for an early meeting. Carter was not slow in replying. Already on November 4, Harriman sent through the Soviet Ambassador in Washington an oral communication for Brezhnev from Carter, saying that the newly elected President considered it important to have a personal meeting with Brezhnev "with the aim of preserving and supporting peace throughout the world," and also thought it useful to organize in the future such meetings "on a regular basis, perhaps once a year." Carter stipulated that he had also had requests from the leaders of England, the FRG and France, and expressed the hope that it would be understood in Moscow that a Soviet-American summit meeting would take place after his meeting with his allies.

After a short time, on November 17, Harriman (whom Carter authorized to act as an unofficial channel between him and Brezhnev in the period before he took office), conveyed Carter's readiness for an exchange of views on matters of mutual interest even during the transition period. It was also stated that he could not yet enter into specific discussions. First, because he could not undercut the sitting President, and second, because he did not yet have his staff of advisers and he did not consider it possible to "improvise." Nevertheless, the exchange of several oral communications between Brezhnev and Carter before January 20, 1977 promised a constructive development of the Soviet-American dialog -- at least on questions of

limitations on strategic weapons -- after Carter took office. It is true that we in Moscow were a little put on guard by the remark in Carter's message of December 1, 1976 that he "could not, of course, be bound by previous negotiations on limiting strategic weapons;" this was a bad omen, which was, unfortunately, soon to be more than borne out. But at that time we wanted to hope for the best.

The Soviet side did not simply hope for the best, but for its part tried to create conditions as favorable as possible for the successful development of a dialogue with President Carter after his taking office. One of the important steps in this regard was the inclusion of a series of important formulations regarding Soviet military policy in a speech in Tula, on the occasion of its designation as Hero-city, given by Brezhnev on January 18, 1977, two days before Carter's inauguration. The essence was the following:

--there is no basis whatsoever for attributing to the Soviet Union a striving for superiority in armaments with the aim of achieving the capability for a nuclear first strike;

--the aim of the Soviet Union is only the creation of a defensive capability sufficient to deter aggression against it by any potential opponent.

In other words, in Brezhnev's speech at Tula in January 1977 the principle of military sufficiency, which was further developed ten years later, was formulated for the first time.

These positions were formulated by representatives of the USSR MFA (specifically by me and L.I. Mendelevich) in a group that prepared the draft Brezhnev speech. I cleared them with the then Chief of the General Staff of the USSR armed forces, V.G. Kulikov, without any difficulty, since these positions reflected the actual state of affairs, although the language sounded a little "American." For just that reason, and not because of disagreement over their content, they evoked doubt, at a certain stage of work on the draft speech, on the part of the party internationalists headed by Ponomarev, but their doubts disappeared after the draft was read to Brezhnev, who accepted them without hesitation. They did not evoke any opposition by other members of the Politburo, including Minister of Defense Ustinov, to whom the draft speech was sent for review in accordance with established procedure.

Since it was important that Washington correctly understand the signal from Moscow contained in Brezhnev's Tula speech, Mendelevich and I supplied TASS and APN in advance with an accurate English translation of the relevant section of the speech.

*When the best is the enemy of the good*

The first letter from President Carter after assuming office, dated January 26, 1977, was taken in Moscow as reinforcement of the hope for successful development of a Soviet-American dialogue on disarmament issues. Carter first of all noted as extremely important Brezhnev's speech in Tula and specifically the position that the

USSR does not strive for superiority in armaments and that it only needs defenses sufficient to deter any potential opponent. Reaffirming his campaign statements that the final aim in disarmament must be the abolition of all nuclear weapons on our planet, Carter characterized as a "critically important first step" on the road to this aim the "achievement of the SALT-2 Treaty without delay" and agreement after that on movement toward further limitations and reductions of strategic weapons. In the context of previous public and private statements by Carter, these formulations were understood in Moscow as signifying his readiness first to quickly conclude and sign the SALT-2 Treaty, based on the Vladivostok accords of 1974 and made concrete in subsequent negotiations still under Ford. Such an approach was fully in accord with the intentions of the Soviet leadership, as was the proposal of the President to send Secretary of State C. Vance to Moscow at an early date to discuss these questions. Consequently, Brezhnev's reply of February 4 to Carter maintained an extremely positive tone.

But the following letter from Carter dated February 14 not only puzzled Brezhnev and his colleagues but aroused their indignation. In his letter, while as before calling for the rapid conclusion of work on the SALT-2 Treaty, Carter at the same time made it clear that he did not at all have in mind that treaty whose framework was worked out at Vladivostok and in subsequent negotiations. In the first place, Carter proposed to anticipate already in this treaty, rather than in the next one, a "significant reduction" in strategic weapons, and secondly he proposed (also contrary to the Vladivostok accords) to leave out of the SALT-2 Treaty, for later negotiations, long-range cruise missiles, that is to give a free hand to a strategic arms race in those directions where the USA, as in most other cases, was at that time ahead of the USSR.

In Carter's letter there were also other elements that caused irritation among Soviet leaders, in particular his declared intent to take a public position on human rights in the USSR. Added to this was the public letter from Carter to A.D. Sakharov. But these irritating elements were not the main things that concerned Moscow. The principal disappointment was the clear departure by the new President from Vladivostok. In view of the internal collisions that Brezhnev had to endure to achieve agreement with Ford in Vladivostok, such a turn by Carter was extremely painful to him not only because of the unacceptable nature of the new American proposals but also as an antagonistic act toward him personally. Consequently, Brezhnev's response was marked by a hard, and in places sharp, tone.

A similar tone was maintained in Carter's message to Brezhnev of March 4, which arrived in Moscow not through the usual diplomatic channels but via the "hot line" between the White House and the Kremlin, which was reserved for use in emergency situations. As Brzezinski wrote in his memoirs, this was done at his initiative, in order that the President's message would go immediately to Brezhnev, bypassing the MFA. But the result turned out worse, since at the Moscow end of the "hot line," maintained by the KGB, translators were on duty who were far from highly qualified, and were moreover unfamiliar with the subject matter of the strategic arms negotiations. Therefore their translation of Carter's message was marred by many inaccuracies and rough spots, which did not exactly facilitate its good reception by Soviet leaders.

Brezhnev's response of March 15 was formulated in calmer tones. But the positions of the sides before Vance's visit to Moscow scheduled for the end of March were basically divergent. While the Soviet side firmly maintained the necessity of completing work on the SALT-2 Treaty on the basis of the Vladivostok accords, the American side was attempting to transform the Vladivostok accords into something completely different, unacceptable to the Soviet leadership from the purely military-strategic as well as the political and psychological point of view. And as the time for the Vance visit approached, it became more and more clear -- from Carter's public statements, from controlled "leaks" in the American press, and then in Vance's conversations with Soviet Ambassador to Washington Dobrynin -- that Vance was coming to Moscow with positions having nothing in common with Vladivostok, with so-called "comprehensive proposals" envisaging "deep cuts" in offensive strategic weapons, with reductions advantageous for the USA. The very fact of publicizing the basic content of the American proposals before Vance presented them to the Soviet leadership was taken in Moscow as an indication that Carter's intentions were not serious, that he was merely trying to achieve a propaganda victory.

Therefore it could be foreseen that the Vance mission to Moscow, as regards the SALT-2 Treaty, was destined for failure. And in fact the new American proposals presented by Vance signaled an obvious retreat from everything achieved in negotiations on SALT-2 under Nixon and Ford and were immediately rejected by the Soviet side without discussion and without putting forward counterproposals; our previous positions, based on the Vladivostok accords, were simply reaffirmed.

It should be noted that, unlike many other occasions, this time there was complete unanimity regarding the new American proposals not only at "the top," in the Soviet leadership, but also among professionals working on these problems. And not because we were all against significant reductions in offensive strategic weapons. Not at all. But we considered it absolutely illogical, lacking any common sense, to throw out the results of five years of joint work in a substantially already finished SALT-2 Treaty, and to begin what amounted to new negotiations requiring new conceptual decisions and prolonged working out of many practical, including technical, questions. The illogic of such a mode of action seemed so obvious that even if Carter's proposals for "deep cuts" were in their content more balanced and in the final analysis acceptable to the USSR, at that moment I nevertheless think they would not have met a positive response. The operating principle would have been "better a titmouse in hand than a crane in the sky." If you take into account that the new American proposals were clearly directed at attaining unilateral advantage for the USA, then they could not be accepted by the Soviet leadership as a serious initiative, and called for a sharply negative reaction.

It should be said that for Vance and Paul Warnke, the director of ACDA who accompanied him, such a reaction by the Soviet side likewise appeared to be not unexpected. It was felt that they themselves were not convinced of the reasonableness of those positions with which they arrived in Moscow. This feeling was fully confirmed subsequently, with the appearance of the memoirs of Carter, Vance and Brzezinski and monographs of American scholars of this period, from

which it is clear that inside the Administration, including between Vance and Brzezinski, there were noticeable differences regarding the American position on strategic offensive weapons. The transformation of Carter's position -- from willingness to conclude the SALT-2 Treaty on the basis of the Vladivostok accords to ambitious "deep cuts" -- can be explained by a series of factors. First, a sincere desire of the President himself to move as rapidly as possible to radical reductions in strategic weapons. Second, a desire by the Pentagon, supported by Brzezinski, to utilize this romantic breakthrough by Carter to significantly alter what was done in strategic arms limitations under Nixon and Ford, that is to alter it for the unilateral advantage of the USA. Third, the influence on the President of Senator Jackson and those who shared his views, who conditioned their support for a possible SALT-2 Treaty with demands regarding its content such that putting such demands forward by the American side could prevent the attainment of a treaty, which in fact is what they wanted. Fourth, although Vance, Warnke and those who shared their views considered it preferable to conclude the SALT-2 Treaty on the basis of the Vladivostok accords, they apparently did not fully realize, and in any case did not succeed in making Carter aware, what a psychological shock for Brezhnev was his [Carter's] rejection of Vladivostok.

Incidentally, knowing well the mood of the Soviet leaders at that time, I can with confidence say that if Carter, as he originally promised, had in March 1977 shown willingness to conclude the SALT-2 Treaty on the basis of Vladivostok, and his proposal regarding "deep cuts" had been presented as an aim for subsequent negotiations, then the SALT-2 Treaty, with approximately the same content as was signed in 1979, could have been completed at the end of 1977 or beginning of 1978. And it is not excluded that the following SALT-3 Treaty, encompassing significant reductions in strategic weapons, could have been worked out already before the end of Carter's term as President. However, the possibility for such a favorable development of events was lost and the process of preparing the SALT-2 Treaty was much longer and more difficult.

For Carter's March initiative on "deep cuts" meant not only the loss of two or three months in a mechanical sense. After the propaganda noise accompanying the March initiative, returning to the "Vladivostok track" for Carter himself was a very difficult matter for prestige and political considerations, since it looked like a defeat and retreat. This caused many additional difficulties in the subsequent negotiations, without which the process of working out the SALT-2 Treaty probably would have been quicker and simpler. Therefore if you consider that the main motive of Carter in the rash decision in March 1977 was his sincere desire for quicker and more radical steps in disarmament, then this is one of those cases to which applies the Russian saying "the best is the enemy of the good." A good impulse led to an opposite result.

[The balance of the chapter describes the "Cuban mini-crisis" and the "Middle-East zig-zag."]

