

July 21, 1969
**Report on Moscow Talks on Middle East, July 14-18,
1969**

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Summary:

Reflections on Sisco's meetings with Soviet officials. Sisco concludes that the Soviets want bilateral talks to continue and plan to slowly chip away at the US position, but see the current situation as manageable. Sisco also provides some recommendations for US strategy over the following months.

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE

WASHINGTON

July 21, 1969

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT AND THE SECRETARY OF STATE

SUBJECT: Report on Moscow Talks on Middle East,
July 14-18, 1969

From two meetings with Foreign Minister Gromyko and three sessions with a delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Vinogradov, I return with the following reflections and judgments:

1. First, the Soviets want the bilaterals to continue for both Middle East and overall US-USSR reasons. They are using the talks at least in part as a demonstration to the Arabs that their efforts to get Israel out of the occupied territories continue unabated, and they see utility in them in discouraging or, failing that, in insulating the escalation of violence in the area against major power involvement. More broadly, it is clear from Gromyko's remarks, they consider the bilateral talks as responsive, in the context of our overall relations, to the President's desire to find areas of agreement of mutual benefit and to move toward an era of negotiation, not confrontation. From our point of view, the bilaterals are an element of restraint in the area, they provide the means to keep the heat on the Soviets, and are more manageable than the four power talks.

2. Second, the Soviets would like a political settlement which would get the Israelis out of the occupied territories, but more significantly they gave no serious signs of concern over the present status quo in the area and seemed prepared to live with it as manageable. While attacking Israeli "stubbornness", they made no pronouncements that the area was moving towards general war. Gromyko continued to condition talks on Middle East conventional arms

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limitation on prior Israeli withdrawal, and he did not even mention to me his July 10 speech proposal of a Middle Eastern nuclear free zone which presumably is intended to get at the Israeli nuclear option.

3. Third, they face something of a quandary about how to handle the UAR since, to get a settlement which will restore occupied Arab territory and bring greater stability to the area thus reducing the risks to them of further Arab military setbacks, they will need to press Nasser to take steps which could undermine him politically. I found no evidence that the Soviets are prepared to press Nasser on the key points of peace and negotiations. I believe they have concluded that Nasser must continue to be their primary tool in the Middle East, that they must continue to support him politically and materially (thus no present interest in Middle East conventional arms limitation), and that they believe Nasser is in more danger of being ousted if he agrees to negotiate peace with Israel than in the present no-peace-no-war circumstances. This is borne out by Syrian President Atassi's remarks to French Ambassador Seydoux in Moscow that the Soviets have taken a decision not to press Nasser for the time being to make concessions.

4. Fourth, their strategy will be to try to chip away at the US position, using the four power mechanism, the UN corridors, and the public forum of the UN Security Council and General Assembly this fall to put pressure on us to press the Israelis to withdraw, or at least to isolate us to the degree possible by portraying American policy as pro-Israeli. They have already informed us of their intention to pursue bilateral talks with the UK and France over the next few weeks.

In these circumstances, I believe our strategy and tactics for the next two months should be:

First, play it cool. We have put forward a proposal

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which will satisfy neither the Arabs nor the Israelis but which protects Israel's basic interests, our own negotiating position and the fundamental principles we consider essential to any settlement. In brief, our counterproposal (a) adheres to the concept that Israeli withdrawal must be in the context of a contractual peace agreement, arrived at by direct talks "at some stage;" (b) would resolve the refugee problem on the basis of equity to both sides; and (c) leaves it to the parties to work out borders and practical security arrangements.

We are in a sound public posture. Having presented a balanced counterproposal in Moscow, we have put the ball in the Soviet court and they are obviously uncomfortable about how to return it.

Second, we should insist on a specific and an overall Soviet reaction to the proposal I left in Moscow and not permit them to nibble at the edges on a piecemeal basis. Gromyko knows that greater specificity by us on withdrawal requires greater specificity on peace and negotiations on their part. They should fully understand what is fundamental to us and where our negotiating position could be flexible if they are able to deliver Nasser. Throughout I tried to convey our sense of confidence that we speak from a position of strength, and while we do not like the present situation in the area, we can live with it if necessary rather than concede on fundamentals.

We got four signs of how the Soviets will play it over the coming weeks:

1. They want to do more business on the Middle East in Moscow as a show to the Arabs that we are going after them, not vice versa. Just as the Israelis fear we will make them sacrificial lambs for overall US-USSR reasons, so

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apparently the Arabs needed assurance that Soviet concern over Communist China would not tempt them to make concessions to us which the Arabs would find extremely difficult to swallow. We should continue to insist that Moscow not become the venue of our talks, but carry on our business with minimal fanfare in both capitals as desirable and necessary.

2. Rather than exchanging further documents, they want to engage in a process of point-by-point negotiation based on their June 17 draft and our counterproposal. I agree we should avoid further exchanges of documents. However, the procedure suggested by the Soviets is premature at best, given the substantial gaps between our positions. We should insist on a full response to our total proposal.

3. They will try to concentrate their fire on withdrawal, demilitarization, and borders while marking time on other points we consider equally fundamental. It should not be difficult to avoid concentration on these aspects to the exclusion of others.

4. They will try to get us to spell out specifically our views on a Jordanian settlement, particularly on the territorial question, since Nasser has linked this with the UAR settlement. While this is no doubt a real problem for Nasser, the UAR-Jordanian linkage also relieves the UAR of making the tough decisions on peace and negotiations. In my response to Gromyko, I said that we agreed with the basic concept that a package settlement must include both the UAR and Jordanian aspect, and possibly even Syria if it ever changes its tune. I did not, therefore, preclude a general discussion of the Jordanian aspect with the Soviets at some later stage. However, I reserved our position by insisting on prior progress on the UAR aspect of the settlement before serious thought could be given to such a general exchange. (I got some intimation that the Soviets for the first time have become aware of direct Israeli-Jordanian contacts and their desire to engage us on this aspect not only meets

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Nasser's requirements to delay difficult decisions but could reflect some Soviet concern over a separate settlement by Hussein, leaving Nasser to stew in his own juice.)

Third, while the two power efforts go forward we should continue close bilateral consultations with the UK and France. From my talks with Stewart and Schumann, it is clear that they have acquiesced, however reluctantly, to the major focus being on the US-USSR talks. However, there are real difficulties ahead with them if, as is likely, no major progress is made by early September. Stewart told me he is under pressure to get the Suez Canal open, and he feels their interests in the Arab states requires a UK initiative in the fall. Schumann, while less doctrinaire than ultra-Gaullist Debre, shares the latter's view that the Four Power mechanism is a useful instrument for pursuing French interests and prestige in the Arab world. I see no decisive change in French Middle East policy in the foreseeable future vis-a-vis Israel, only a softened and surface change of style.

On substance, the UK, and to a greater extent the French, are more disposed to favor arrangements devised by the major powers with prime reliance on a long time UN presence rather than the directly negotiated peace and security arrangements which the Israelis are insisting upon. There is considerable parallelism of UK, French, and USSR interests in the Arab world which will continue to plague us in the days ahead. In my judgment we might well begin to look for ways to disengage from the automatic assumption being made by our allies on the longevity of the four power talks. They should not become an end in themselves. When the President agreed to four power talks it was in the framework of prior progress in bilateral discussions. We have given the four power talks a good try; for the foreseeable future we might well return to the original conception of preconditioning further formal four power meetings on progress in the bilateral context with the UK, France and the USSR.

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Fourth, we have begun to lay the groundwork for bilateral discussions between the numerous Foreign Ministers who will be present during the opening two weeks of the UN General Assembly in the last half of September. Israel will wish to mark time during the election period which is likely to become more complicated. They will, at least for the record, contend unjustifiably that the document we left in Moscow last week is a further erosion. We can nevertheless demonstrate clearly to the Israelis, even though they will not grant us this point, that we have held firmly on fundamentals. In any event, it is salutary for the Israelis to know our determination to act independently of them when we judge this is necessary in our own national interest. Moreover, the Moscow trip, as part of the balancing act we are in, should help keep up Hussein's morale in the short run.

The present Israeli position is unrealistic: they simply want Jarring to call the UAR to a meeting with them on the basis of an oft-repeated promise they will be flexible in such talks. Jarring, whom I briefed in Stockholm, responded favorably to my suggestion that he plan to be available during the early days of the Assembly. However, he made clear he needs a common document as a fresh substantive framework in order to renew his efforts with the parties. After reading our latest proposal and comparing it with the Soviet document of June 17, he said we are still far apart.

Fifth, we must, of course, remain ready to respond affirmatively if the unexpected occurs: a genuine Soviet move in our direction. At present, we and the Soviets are essentially agreed on the principle that withdrawal can only take place in the context of a contractual peace agreement. If the Soviets should in fact move further toward our position, my own judgment is that neither the form of a commitment to peace, nor navigation rights, nor refugees, nor withdrawal and borders on the UAR side of the settlement

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will become major sticking points. In addition to the need for progress on the Jordanian side, the major substantive sticking points are likely to relate to the kind of practical security arrangements on the ground which should be part of the settlement. I do not believe this aspect can be satisfactorily resolved by major powers in either the bilateral or multilateral context. With this and related problems in mind, I suggested to the Soviets that we should consider the possibility that we will not succeed in reaching agreement on all issues and that rather than permit our efforts to abort, we should develop a common document for Jarring recording agreement on as many points as possible and formulating points on which we do not agree in neutral language not prejudging either side's position. They seem tempted. With such a document Jarring could renew his efforts with the parties with continuing US and USSR support.

Sixth, we will want to keep in mind the forthcoming visit of Prime Minister Meir in late September which, if an unexpected narrowing of the US-USSR gap should occur, could provide an opportunity for a major effort with the Israelis. We are, as you know, ahead of the Israelis in the substantive positions taken, even though we have protected their vital interests and negotiating position. If the Soviets should surprisingly decide to get out ahead of the UAR, or even more surprising, should move Nasser forward on the fundamental elements of settlement, the President will be faced with some hard decisions with respect to US-Israeli relations and a peace settlement in the Middle East.

Finally, from a public relations point of view we should continue to portray our efforts as a continuing process in pursuit of a permanent peace with the Moscow interlude neither a breakthrough nor a breakdown. We need to continue to avoid in present circumstances the twin dangers of stimulating unfounded expectations or overdrawn characterizations of failure.

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The above thoughts, of course, are not recommendations, which must await the Soviet response to our counterproposal. However, they do reflect the thrust of my present thinking in the light of the Moscow talks.

I will be joining the President for the last half of his trip, and I will be available if the President desires to discuss the matter further. There will be considerable interest in the Middle East in Delhi, Bucharest and London.



Joseph J. Sisco
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