no desire to abandon them. What Khrushchev proudly referred to as the German Democratic Republic, Eisenhower called the Soviet Zone. The future peace and stability of Europe would depend on resolving the tension between those two concepts. Thanks to Khrushchev’s energy and ambition, the German issue, which remained a core concern for both Moscow and Washington for the rest of Eisenhower’s and Khrushchev’s time in power, soon had competition from newer core concerns in geographical regions far outside the traditional areas of U.S.-Soviet rivalry.

ARMS TO EGYPT

"RED BLUEPRINT FOR CONQUEST" read the golden banner headline across a portrait of an unsmiling Khrushchev on the November 28, 1955, cover of Newsweek. “Russia’s supersalesman, Nikita S. Khrushchev,” went the teaser line, “has begun a month-long invasion of Asia’s have-not nations, peddling a new line of promises.”

For most of 1955 Khrushchev had largely hidden his role in reorienting Soviet foreign policy. The struggles over Soviet policy toward Austria, Yugoslavia, and Germany had taken place behind the opaque walls of the Kremlin. Over the summer rumors had circulated that Molotov might be replaced by Khrushchev’s protégé Dmitri Shepilov, the editor in chief of Pravda, but this hadn’t happened, and the usually dour foreign minister had managed to deflect attention with some uncharacteristic public joking about the speculation. At Geneva Khrushchev had been perceived as the strongest opponent of Eisenhower’s Open Skies position, but his overall influence in setting the general Soviet line in foreign policy had not yet been picked up.

It was in the third world that Khrushchev would first come to personify a new and ambitious Soviet approach to the Cold War. "Let us verify in practice whose system is better," he proclaimed on a state trip to India in late 1955. "We say to the leaders of the capitalist states: Let us compete without war." Khrushchev was eager to extend this competition for influence to the developing world, where the dissolution of the great European empires had brought forward a new generation of leaders who were looking for advice, money, and legitimacy.

The event that drew the world’s attention to Khrushchev’s ambitions in the developing world came in late September 1955, when Egypt’s leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, announced that his country would be buying weapons from the Soviet bloc. Cairo’s action reordered the politics of the Middle East and in the minds of Eisenhower, Eden, and the French leadership represented the great-
est bid for hegemony over that oil-rich area since German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's panzers were on the outskirts of Alexandria in 1942. The Middle East was an unexpected place for the Soviets to seek influence. Britain and Imperial Russia had not contested the region in the nineteenth century, and with the exception of Stalin's brief play for a colony in Libya after World War II and some equally short-lived support for the new state of Israel, Soviet regimes had largely stayed clear of the area. The Egyptian decision to buy Soviet weapons signaled a major departure for the Kremlin in a region that was of strategic importance to the United States and Western Europe. Whatever terms Khrushchev might use to try to soften his drive for influence in the postcolonial world, the apparent Soviet-Egyptian alliance represented realpolitik pure and simple. What the West did not understand was that the story could have very easily turned out differently.

**Initial Soviet Efforts** to build a relationship with Egypt predated Khrushchev's eclipsing of Molotov. In the months following Stalin's death Soviet diplomats fanned out to the developing world in the hope of establishing diplomatic relations and in search of trade and cultural relationships. There actually weren't as yet many countries to choose from; the explosion of sovereignty in Asia and Africa was still five years away. India, Indonesia, and Egypt therefore received most of the wooing, though Moscow also made an effort with some Latin American republics. Of these first three big partners, Egypt ultimately drew the closest to the Soviet Union. But this was hardly predictable.

In its first phase the Soviet-Egyptian relationship was almost exclusively economic. The catalyst for this limited relationship was the overthrow of the Egyptian royal house in July 1952 by a military junta led by General Mohammed Naguib. A staunch Egyptian nationalist, Naguib was eager to reduce Egyptian dependence on the British, who had exercised influence over the fallen King Farouk, and was prepared to take help from anyone else. In August 1953 Soviet and Egyptian representatives negotiated an economic agreement. Trade negotiations followed in the fall with the result that a barter deal was signed the following spring. Egypt was soon buying as much as 40 percent of its kerosene from the USSR and the Soviet-bloc's Romania. In return the Soviets purchased Egyptian cotton.

When Nasser replaced Naguib in 1954, the relationship with Moscow seemed to stall. Barely thirty-five years old, Nasser had been the brains behind the overthrow of King Farouk. His enormous charisma had created a devoted following among the men who had served with him. Once this charisma was projected to the Egyptian people and beyond, largely through dynamic public speeches broadcast on radio, his following grew into the millions. Nasser brought an expansive political message to his audiences. He dreamed of uniting the entire Arab world in one state and under Egyptian leadership. In a book of his ruminations published as The Philosophy of the Revolution, Nasser said, "For some reason it seems to me that within the Arab circle there is a role wandering aimlessly in search of a hero. And I do not know why it seems to me that this role, exhausted by its wanderings, has at last settled down, tired and weary, near the borders of our country and is beckoning us to move, to take up its lines, to put on its costume since no one else is qualified to play it."4

Initially Nasser was not that keen to expend much of his charm on the Soviets. He was deeply mistrustful of communists and assumed that the Soviets would use Arab Communists to weaken him and threaten Arab Nationalism. Because of his special interest in the Sudan, where he had served as an officer, he was especially concerned about Moscow's ambitions in that former British colony.

Nasser's principal objective in his first months at the top had been to eliminate Great Britain's remaining influence over Egypt. Britain still had troops in the Suez Canal Zone, and Nasser wanted to negotiate them out of the country. He did not want to give London a pretext to delay negotiations out of fear that he was close to Moscow.

Aware of Egypt's deep financial difficulties—this developing country had few natural resources and few exports yet needed to import vast quantities of industrial goods—Nasser permitted his government to continue talking to Soviet representatives about economic matters. Indeed, Nasser bent their ears to interest Moscow in his great dream of building the Aswan High Dam, a gargantuan project to create hydroelectric power and regulate the flow of the Nile. He hoped the Soviets would consider providing him with financial assistance to undertake this project.

In 1953 and early 1954 Nasser had also informed Soviet representatives that he hoped to equip the Egyptian military with modern weapons. But he was very coy. Although he hinted at perhaps shopping for these in the Soviet bloc, he avoided making a formal request. What he did not tell the Kremlin was that he preferred to buy American weapons. The problem for him was that since 1950 it was the declared policy of the United States to discourage the flow of weapons into the Middle East to prevent another Arab-Israeli war. The United States had joined Great Britain and France in issuing the Tripartite

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Declaration, serving notice on the Arabs and the Israelis that they could expect to buy whatever military supplies they needed for internal security and self-defense, but nothing more. Nasser wanted more.

A dramatic event in the summer of 1954, thousands of miles from Egypt, very nearly brought the Kremlin’s hopes for a close relationship with Nasser to an abrupt end. The June 1954 overthrow of another young progressive colonel in Central America reinforced Nasser’s reluctance to get too close to the Soviet Union. Although it predated Khrushchev’s emergence as a major player in shaping Soviet foreign policy, the case of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala would remain an enduring object lesson in what could go wrong for Moscow whenever it tried to help a third world regime. This sad tale not only complicated Nasser’s relations with the Kremlin before the breakthrough of 1955 but would affect Khrushchev’s future relationships with third world leaders, especially in areas where the U.S. was the predominant power.

When Arbenz was elected president of Guatemala in late 1950, Moscow did not consider him a Communist, though the Foreign Ministry knew that some of his advisers were leading members of the Guatemalan Communist Party. The Kremlin had watched with approval as the Guatemalan parliament passed, in 1952, an extensive land reform decree which in the following year permitted Arbenz to nationalize the vast tracts of unused real estate belonging to the two largest firms in Guatemala, the United Fruit Company and the American Railway Company.

Not surprisingly Washington viewed these events differently. Arbenz’s land reform stirred concerns in the United States that he might be a Communist. The Truman administration launched the first covert action designed to overthrow Arbenz, but the job was finished by Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles when they came into office in 1953. Eisenhower shared Dulles’s alarm about the susceptibility of the third world to Communist infiltration. Speaking for the new administration, Dulles explained the nature of this threat to Western security:

On the free world front the colonial and dependent areas are the fields of most drastic contest. Here the policies of the West and those of Soviet imperialism come into headlong collision. . . . The Soviet leaders, in mapping their strategy for world conquest, hit on nationalism as a device for absorbing the colonial peoples. . . . In the first phase the nationalism involves the nationalist aspirations of the people, so that they will rebel violently against the existing order. Then, before newly won independence can become consolidated and vigorous in its own right, Communists will take over the new government and use the power to “amalgamate” the people into the Soviet orbit.

The new administration quickly deemed Guatemala a major battleground in this new war. The covert action authorized by President Eisenhower was designed to undermine Arbenz’s support within the Guatemalan Army. Like all armies in the developing world, it was poorly equipped, and its leaders, though some had served with Arbenz for some time, judged his commitment to the army as an institution in modern Guatemala in terms of how well he could equip it. Washington imposed as tight an arms embargo as possible on the country. Timed to coincide with an extensive propaganda campaign that played on military fears of Communist influence, the operation was intended to culminate in a series of small military skirmishes led by counterrevolutionaries that would spark a sympathetic military coup.

Faced with this embargo and aware of the propaganda campaign, Arbenz sought weapons from the Soviet bloc. In the spring of 1954 the Kremlin arranged for Czech weapons to be carried on a Swedish ship, the Alfhelm. Although measures were taken to hide the ship’s destination from even the captain until he had reached the Caribbean, there was not much that was covert about the Soviet operation. The Guatemalans had to pay for the weapons themselves and the $4.9 million transaction was carried by commercial wire through the Union Bank of Switzerland and Stabank, Prague to the Czech company Investa.

As the Kremlin watched, this arms deal set in motion a series of events that were tragic for Arbenz and Guatemala. The CIA easily picked up news of the commercial transaction and, after mistakenly following a West German freighter, determined the arms were on the Alfhelm. At a press conference on May 25, 1954, Foster Dulles denounced the shipment as dramatic evidence of the international Communist conspiracy. The Alfhelm quickly became a powerful symbol that created enormous support in Washington to do something about Soviet machinations in the third world. “[This cargo of arms is like an atomic bomb planted in the rear of our backyard,” said the Speaker of the House of Representatives, John McCormack. “The threat of Communist imperialism,” said the Washington Post, “is no longer academic, it has arrived.”

What was a black eye for the Kremlin turned out to be a terminal condition for the Arbenz regime. The docking of the Alfhelm accelerated CIA planning for an attack. On June 18, 1954, a small rebel force, including former officers who had never been with Arbenz, landed near the capital and provisioned a barracks. The dockings of the Alfhelm, the attack on the barracks, and the ensuing civil war signaled the end of an era in the Central American countries, as the United States and the Soviet Union competed for influence in the region. The dramatic event that brought the Kremlin’s hopes for a close relationship with Nasser to an abrupt end was over.
The successful attack on Egyptian territory not only base in Israel, the town of Suez at the southern end of the Suez Canal by and create a sense of increasing disorder that would into to rekindle Aljhelm interest in the country. This force was not designed to overthrow Arbenz—the CIA case officer for the operation called it “extremely small and ill-trained”—and it didn’t. What it was supposed to do was to magnify the anxiety fostered by the arrival of the Aljhelm and create a sense of increasing disorder that would push the Guatemalan Army to get rid of Arbenz. This it did. Fence-sitters in the Guatemalan Army, few of whom had not been told of the secret purchase from the East, had already started viewing Arbenz as Moscow’s puppet. The discovery of the Aljhelm helped the United States rally support for a strong response from members of the Organization of American States (OAS), which in 1950 had gone on record opposing the spread of communism or Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Having provided their enemies with so much fodder, the Soviets found they could do nothing else for their friends. No Soviet service, including the KGB, had a direct line to Guatemala City. The Soviet Navy was incapable of projecting force into the Caribbean, and the Soviet Union lacked any nearby military bases that could sponsor a show of force of any kind.

On June 23, 1954, the Guatemalans requested assistance from the Soviet Union. At the very least they wanted Soviet diplomats to use the UN Security Council to stop the fighting. The next day Molotov instructed the Soviet delegation at the United Nations to express Moscow’s “deepest sympathies” for the Guatemalan people and to push for Security Council action. Meanwhile the situation went from bad to worse in the country. On June 25 the Guatemalan foreign minister cabled the Kremlin that jets piloted by rebels had begun bombing Guatemalan cities from bases in Honduras. This disturbing message was distributed to Khrushchev and the other members of the Presidium, who decided to publish the sad correspondence with Arbenz’s foreign minister for want of anything better to do for the dying regime.

As the Presidium was deciding it could do little to help the Guatemalan government, Arbenz was telling his cabinet and the leaders of his movement that the army was in revolt. Two days later Arbenz was overthrown by a military that both feared Moscow’s presumed influence and wished to avoid Washington’s expected retribution.

For six months after the fall of Arbenz, Nasser avoided the subject of Soviet military assistance. As if the events in Guatemala had not been enough of a reason for caution, the conclusion of the long-awaited military agreement with the British that same summer underscored the folly of risking Western ire. Nasser’s confidence about Egypt’s destiny in the region that he decided that he could not wait until 1956 to create a modern Egyptian military. That month the British government played midwife to a defense arrangement signed between Iraq and Turkey. Egypt interpreted the pact as both a British effort to retain influence in the region after the Suez base agreement and as an Iraqi bid for dominance. In the modern era Egypt and Iraq had continued the centuries-long rivalry between the civilizations along the Nile and the Euphrates, often by playing one foreign empire off another in an attempt at regional dominance. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said lacked Nasser’s charisma but not his regional ambitions. A close ally of Great Britain’s and friendly toward the United States, Nuri saw the agreement with Turkey as the basis of a wider alliance that would link all pro-Western Arab regimes under Iraqi leadership in the Middle East, precisely what the Kremlin feared.

The British had tried to involve the Egyptians. Before the Turks and Iraq had signed their agreement, British Prime Minister Eden visited Nasser in Cairo in February 1955 in an effort to convince the Egyptian leader to join an anti-Soviet military pact. Nasser, who was too skeptical of British aims to join, told him that if the Soviet Union attacked Egypt, he would request Western assistance, and if the West attacked Egypt, he would turn east for help.

The second event involved Israel. On February 28, 1955, four days after the Turks and the Iraqis signed their agreement in Baghdad, paratroops under the command of a young officer named Ariel Sharon infiltrated Egyptian military positions in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli mission was to damage the bases from which Palestinian commandoes, the so-called fedayeen, were believed to be operating into Israel. The successful attack on Egyptian territory not only humiliated Nasser but played upon his deep suspicion that Israel was an agent of British imperialism. Despite the history of the Jewish struggle with the British authorities in Palestine, Nasser stubbornly believed in the existence of ongoing secret coordination between the British and Israeli governments and he convinced himself that London had ordered the Israelis to attack Gaza. “The western powers are continually using Israel to organize all kinds of provocations against us,” Nasser later confided to Nikita Khrushchev. In his eyes, the Gaza attack was payback for his refusal to join the Turkish-Iraqi alliance, the so-called Baghdad Pact.

In Moscow only one event was required in February 1955 to rekindle interest in arms to Egypt. The first involved the British, who had tried to involve the Egyptians in a defense agreement with Iraq and Turkey. The second event was the Israeli attack on Egyptian military bases in the Gaza Strip. The British had tried to involve the Egyptians. Before the Turks and Iraq had signed their agreement, British Prime Minister Eden visited Nasser in Cairo in February 1955 in an effort to convince the Egyptian leader to join an anti-Soviet military pact. Nasser, who was too skeptical of British aims to join, told him that if the Soviet Union attacked Egypt, he would request Western assistance, and if the West attacked Egypt, he would turn east for help.

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in closer relations with Egypt. The creation of the Baghdad Pact symbolized a tightening of the vise established by the West and its allies all along the periphery of the Soviet Union. Fearing that Turkey and Iraq would soon be joined in the alliance by Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, and Libya, thus transforming it into a region-wide anti-Soviet bloc, Moscow saw a new mutuality of interests with Arab nationalists, especially Nasser. His dreams of Arab unity were incompatible with the formation of a regional bloc centered on Turkey and Iraq.

To signal their willingness to establish closer relations, the Soviets made a sudden 180-degree change in their policy toward Egypt's neighbor the Sudan. In 1954 Soviet propaganda and the Sudanese Communists had argued against the union of Sudan and Egypt, which Moscow knew was one of Nasser's goals. In February 1955, Moscow began publicly supporting the unity of the Nile Valley.

**KHRUSHCHEV'S PERSONAL ROLE** in this shift in policy toward the Sudan is unknown. In February he was very busy with the formal removal of Georgi Malenkov as Soviet premier. But there is evidence that he soon took a special interest in Nasser. Khrushchev was encouraged when, as hoped, Nasser responded to the policy change by initiating discussions about buying Soviet weapons. But when the Kremlin answered that it could start serious negotiations immediately, Nasser again became elusive. And by May 1955 the news from Cairo was discouraging for Khrushchev. In conversations at the Soviet Embassy, Nasser was alluding to the “risks” involved in acquiring Soviet weapons, a subtle reference to the calamity in Guatemala. Moreover, having just returned from the inaugural conference of the nonaligned movement in Bandung, Indonesia, Nasser was not at all subtle in assuring the Kremlin that he had no intention of joining the Soviet bloc. He told Soviet Ambassador Daniel Solod that he was beginning to fear that strengthening economic and cultural ties between Egypt and the Soviet Union would lead to an increase in the activity of the Egyptian Communist Party, something he considered against the interests of his Revolution. In light of the Communists' anti-Nasser propaganda, which he assumed was directed from Moscow, the Egyptian leader explained to Solod that he had real doubts that the Kremlin truly supported his regime.

Somewhat exasperated, Khrushchev asked Tito during his trip to Yugoslavia in June for his opinion of the Egyptian. Tito advised him to be patient. “Nasser is well disposed toward the USSR,” the Yugoslav replied.

Khrushchev understood that Moscow's appeal to Nasser, if successful, would have to be based on the two leaders' shared interest in reducing Western imperial power in the Middle East. Streams of information from the Soviet Embassy in Cairo and via Moscow's official TASS news agency and the KGB detailed Nasser's staunch anticomunism and his preference for U.S. military assistance. Khrushchev was nevertheless optimistic that the two countries and even the two leaders could develop a tight bond. Nasser, however, was stalling because he did not share Khrushchev's belief that close relations between Cairo and Moscow were inevitable. The events in Baghdad and the Gaza Strip served as warnings that Egypt needed to be stronger; but they were not arguments necessarily in favor of looking East for help. Nasser still preferred U.S. military assistance, if he could find away to convince the Americans to circumvent the Tripartite Declaration. The Americans had already been generous with Egypt. In November 1954, Washington had provided Cairo with forty million dollars in economic aid.

In June 1955 the Egyptian leader decided that while keeping the Soviets at bay, he should start playing upon U.S. fears of Soviet influence in the Middle East to force the Eisenhower administration to reconsider its policy on military assistance.

“The Russians have offered me all that we need in arms,” Nasser told U.S. Ambassador Henry Byroade on June 9. To add an edge to his little deception—for Moscow had not gotten down to any details with Nasser about a military package—Nasser advised the U.S. ambassador that he had a military mission that was poised to go to Moscow in a week. When he still didn't get a quick answer from the Americans, Nasser chose a dramatic gesture to get President Eisenhower's attention. On June 16 he arrested the leaders of the Egyptian Communist Party and then went back to the U.S. ambassador.

Byroade pushed Washington to give Nasser a reason to believe the United States would sell him weapons. The challenge for Washington was to establish a balance between this policy of cultivating Nasser and the need not to alienate the Israelis and the British. Domestic politics, even more imperatively than Israel's evidently pro-Western orientation, argued for not ignoring Israel. Egypt was an equally sensitive point with the British, who had effectively exercised a veto on U.S. aid to Nasser during the negotiations of the June 1954 Suez base agreement. The product of this dilemma was the Anglo-American Alpha program, an initiative designed to seek a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict through mutual border concessions, massive regional development projects, and economic assistance to both sides.

Although Washington and London had been talking about the Alpha program since January 1955, it had yet to be launched.
The day after Nasser jailed the Egyptian Communist leaders, Washington informed Egypt that it was welcome to purchase arms and that its requests would be judged within the framework of the principles of the Tripartite Declaration. If Egyptian requests were “reasonable,” Nasser could expect a positive response from Washington.30

Nasser submitted a wish list to the Americans on June 30. In all he wanted twenty-seven million dollars’ worth of equipment. At the heart of the request were 120 M4 medium tanks, 15 M24 flamethrower tanks, and 26 B-26 jet aircraft. The list was delivered by Nasser’s chief of staff, Ali Sabri.31 Nasser had yet to send a similar list to the Soviets.

The United States responded rapidly to this request. Nasser had firm allies within the administration, including the president. When Eisenhower saw the list of what Egypt wanted, he thought it reasonable. Dulles did not oppose the sale. In fact these events compelled him to work on a general statement of U.S. policy in the region. The administration had promised this statement in 1953 but had decided to wait out the midterm congressional elections in 1954 before approaching such a sensitive political matter.

The problem that the drafters of this general statement faced was that Egypt’s long-range goals in the Middle East were incompatible with the realities of the Middle East or U.S. policy there. First, Nasser wanted material compensation for the Palestinian refugees. He did not insist that these refugees had the right to return to pre-1948 Palestine, but he believed they deserved a better life in whatever Arab country in which they had resettled. Nasser’s other goal, however, would never be acceptable. As the Egyptian foreign minister explained to John Foster Dulles, “If I wish to go by car from Egypt to Damascus, I would have to have to obtain the permission of Mr. Sharett [the Israeli prime minister],” Egypt wanted the Negev desert to be ceded by Israel to Jordan, “including Beersheba,” a town that had been included in the original British plan for state of Israel.32 No Israeli or American Jew would permit that to happen peacefully.

A still greater problem was that Egypt couldn’t really afford to pay for these weapons. At the very least Nasser would need them to be given at a discount. The Egyptian government was hemorrhaging foreign reserves, at the rate of about two million dollars per month. Cairo had only about twenty-four million dollars in hard currency left. In early August, a month after his representative sent the wish list, Nasser himself appeared at the U.S. Embassy to ask for American financial assistance in buying the weapons.

Byroade didn’t quite understand the significance of this conversation. In contrast with Washington’s reaction to Nasser’s June wish list, the administration was slow to respond to his new request. The delay would have severe consequences.

KHRUSHCHEV WAS MEANWHILE getting impatient with Nasser. Unaware of the details of Nasser’s visits to the U.S. Embassy but no doubt suspicious, Khrushchev decided to send Dmitri T. Shepilov to Egypt to edge Nasser closer to forming a military alliance against the Baghdad Pact. It had been three months since Moscow had made its offer to provide weapons to Egypt, yet not only had the Egyptians not accepted the offer, but Nasser seemed to be intentionally delaying taking the next step. Shepilov, a trusted associate who understood how Khrushchev thought on foreign affairs, would make a perfect representative and observer.

“Dmitri the Progressive,” as Shepilov was known by the Moscow elite, was a Khrushchev lucky charm. Having ascended to the editorship of Pravda in 1952 at the age of forty-seven, he had been Khrushchev’s most important ally in shaping the Soviet press to reflect Khrushchev’s rise in stature. It was Shepilov who had written Malenkov’s political obituary in January 1955, with a perfectly timed article critiquing Malenkov’s approach to economics. Although economics was Shepilov’s chosen specialty, Khrushchev decided to groom him for a responsibility in foreign affairs. In 1954 Shepilov was given the chairmanship of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Council of Nationalities, one of many standing committees on the government side of the massive Soviet bureaucracy. There Shepilov had campaigned against Molotov’s worldview, advocating the Khrushchev line of peaceful coexistence and the senselessness of continuing the rift with Tito.

Shepilov’s rise accelerated with Malenkov’s dismissal. Khrushchev brought Shepilov into the planning of the trip to Belgrade, where he played a role in writing the diplomatic communiqué that the Soviets offered the Yugoslav Communist Party as a possible joint statement of fraternity and solidarity. The Yugoslavs had opposed the joint statement, but this failure had no negative consequences for Shepilov. In early July 1955 Khrushchev rewarded Shepilov for his loyalty by making him one of three new secretaries of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, effectively the new Khrushchev team.33
from July 21 to 29, helped clear the air in Cairo about Soviet intentions. For all his doubts about the Soviets, Nasser was willing to give them a chance to prove themselves. He therefore arranged a very personal visit for Shepilov. The Soviet representative was invited to dinner at the home of Abdel Nasser Hussein, Nasser's father, in Alexandria.

Rumors swirled in Moscow that the younger Nasser had once been a devotee of Adolf Hitler, that there was a portrait of Hitler on Nasser's desk. Shepilov did not find a fascist. What he thought he found was a man with somewhat confused political views. "There was such a soup [of ideas] in his brain, especially at the time of our first meeting," he later recalled.35

When Shepilov asked him what his goals were, Nasser introduced a new concept to the editor of Pravda: "We would like to build moderate socialism."

"What exactly is that?" Shepilov asked.

"It is socialism without capitalists, without imperialists, and without Communists" was the response.

Shepilov was dismissive. "That kind of socialism doesn't exist."

But Nasser wanted to understand Moscow. He was not about to give up on Khrushchev's envoy. So the men talked for days. "You wrote a book, didn't you?" Nasser asked at one point. Shepilov had written a text on political economy. "Well, is it available in English?" It was, and the Egyptian, who could read English well, wanted a copy to learn even more about Shepilov's thinking.

The Shepilov visit calmed Nasser's concerns about Moscow enough for him to move to the next step in purchasing Soviet weapons. Still having heard nothing concrete from the Americans, Nasser authorized the dispatch of a military purchasing mission behind the iron curtain. These first negotiations were for the supply of Soviet planes. The Egyptians requested jet fighters, the MiG-15s and Nasser asked that these discussions be held in secret.36

The Soviets suggested Prague as the location for these meetings. Ironically the Soviets were reviving a Czech back channel that had initially been established to permit secret deliveries of weapons to the Jews in Palestine in 1947 and 1948 before the proclamation of the state of Israel. Now with the shift in the geopolitical needs of the Soviet Union, this system would serve the Arabs. To help shield the group, Cairo also decided not to inform its embassy in Prague of the existence of this delegation. Few Czechs were told of the negotiations either. The Soviets took responsibility for the protection of the Egyptian teams, and Cairo asked Moscow to provide the communications link between Nasser and his representatives in Prague.

Nasser was still very uncomfortable with this decision. Communists were his enemies in Egypt and his rivals for authority in the rest of the Arab world. Nasser might well have waited longer to give the United States another chance to help him had it not been for an event in the Sudan in August 1955 that touched on Nasser's deepest insecurities.

Sudan loomed large in the consciousness of Nasser and his fellow revolutionaries. Since the nineteenth century, the British and the Egyptians had contested control over the land that contained the headwaters of the Nile. In 1899 Britain had arranged an Anglo-Egyptian condominium in the region, effectively sharing control with the authority in Cairo. A motherland issue for the Free Officers led by Nasser was the revocation of that condominium to permit the unification of Sudan and Egypt. This goal was related to the regime's extensive plans for the development of the Nile. But it was also linked to the traditional Egyptian claim on the ancient kingdom of Nubia, so redolent of ancient Egyptian power. Personal history also played a role for the young revolutionaries. Two of Nasser's closest allies, the Salem brothers, had grown up in Port Sudan, and since 1954 Salach Salem had been Nasser's deputy for Sudanese affairs. Nasser had had his own Sudanese days. He and his military chief of staff, Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, had spent the opening years of World War II stationed in the Sudan as lieutenants in the Egyptian Army.37 It may therefore seem less surprising to reveal that events in the Sudan provided the final nudge to send Nasser into a Soviet arms deal.

Although the new line taken by the Kremlin on this issue after February 1955 should have pleased Nasser, it was contradicted by the propaganda of the Sudanese Communist Party, which continued to attack the Sudanese government for "selling out the Sudan to Gamal Abdel Nasser."38 Like many world leaders, Nasser couldn't believe that Communists anywhere could act independent of the Soviet party. As recently as June Salach Salem had been instructed to ask Soviet Ambassador Daniel Solod what Moscow thought it was doing in allowing Sudanese Communists to attack the regime in Cairo.39

Despite the assurances coming directly from Moscow, Nasser had a hard time shaking the view that statements by the Sudanese Communist Party were a better barometer of the Kremlin's real intentions in the region. Then two coinciding events convinced him that his greater enemies lay elsewhere.

On August 19, when armed riots broke out in three southern Sudanese provinces, the government in Khartoum blamed Nasser. It asserted that the
organizer of the riots was a longtime advocate of Sudanese-Egyptian union, who had only recently been in Cairo for the celebration of the third anniversary of the overthrow of King Farouk. Nasser had had nothing to do with these riots. Moreover, whatever Nasser initially thought of the events in the Sudan, his assessment was immediately affected by an occurrence hundreds of miles away in the Gaza Strip. Early on the morning of August 22 the Israelis killed an Egyptian officer and at least two enlisted men near Kilometer 95 in the Gaza Strip.

As Nasser had done in February, he linked Israel's latest Gaza raid to a large geopolitical conspiracy. Nasser convinced himself that Great Britain had stage-managed the Israeli attack to distract Egypt from southern Sudan. Because Nasser thought the black residents of southern Sudan incapable of political self-organization, he immediately assumed that the riots that started on August 19 had to have been orchestrated by outsiders. Nasser assumed the Sudanese government would request British intervention to quell the riots, which would allow a de facto division between a pro-Egyptian northern and a pro-British southern Sudan.

A few hours after the Israeli attack in Gaza, Nasser's most trusted adviser, Ali Sabri, met with the Soviet ambassador. Cairo now wanted to speed up the negotiations in Prague. At Nasser's request, Sabri laid out Cairo's conspiracy theory to the Soviets. Nasser expected a British military intervention in the southern Sudan. There were no roads connecting Egypt and the Sudan, and in any case, the northern Sudan was separated from the southern provinces by a marsh. The only way the Egyptian Army could reach the rioters was by air. So desperate were the Egyptians for assistance in the Sudan that Sabri explained Cairo would permit Soviet pilots to fly the MiG-15s and Soviet military cargo planes directly to Almaza Airport in Cairo.

Not only did Washington miss entirely the deep effect that the riots in the Sudan were having on the Egyptian leader, but the secretary of state was convinced that Nasser could be satisfied with less than a concrete offer of an affordable arms deal. On August 23 Byroade was instructed to meet Nasser to tell him the statement was coming. Byroade went the next day and found Nasser surprisingly passive. A few days later, when he presented an advance copy of Dulles's speech to Nasser, once again the usual Nasser fire was absent. "Had [the] feeling he [was] somewhat confused by general nature of the approach and really did not understand significance of some passages," Byroade cabled. Nasser was not so much confused as distracted and disappointed. He had wanted a response to his request for U.S. economic assistance to pay for the twenty-seven million dollars' worth of weapons. Instead Dulles was sharing a vaguely worded commitment to a general peace agreement in the Middle East.

As Dulles put the finishing touches on his address, Nasser asked for even more from the Soviets. Now convinced that the United States would not subsidize his purchase of M4 tanks, Nasser asked the Soviets for tanks. He also requested a financial aid package to buy all the weapons, the planes, and these newly requested tanks. Despite what he later said publicly, Nasser could not afford to buy any modern weaponry at commercial prices.

In the end, the Soviets got their deal by trying harder to appease Nasser than did the Americans. In early September the Presidium decided to agree in principle to sell Egypt tanks, though the quantity and model remained to be determined. More important, given Nasser's immediate concerns, the Soviets allowed him to buy the artillery pieces and the MiG-15 fighters now and told him that they would accept barter as payment for most of it. After paying for a fifth of the total in Egyptian pounds, Cairo could defray the remaining bill gradually by means of sending rice, cotton, leather, and even silk clasps to the USSR. This remainder was effectively a loan that would increase by 2 percent a year. These were even better terms than Cairo had requested from Washington. On September 12 Soviet and Egyptian negotiators signed the agreement in Prague.

A week later U.S. intelligence agents in Cairo picked up pieces of the story from their sources. Sunday evening, September 19, the embassy in Cairo cabled Washington: "[Egyptian] acceptance Soviet arms offer likely . . . Soviet offer said to be embarrassing in size." One person who was not surprised was U.S. Ambassador Byroade. When the State Department received Cables A WEEK LATER • ARMS TO EGYPT • 71
by asking him to warn Nasser that any Egyptian arms deal with the Soviets “would create most serious public reaction in the US and greatly complicate our ability [to] cooperate with them,” Byroade said that this threat lacked the power that it once had.\(^6\) He had said this so many times to Nasser, while promising that an alliance with the United States would be helpful to Cairo, that he was beginning to sound like a broken record. It was time for positive action. Why hadn’t Washington responded favorably to Nasser’s request in late August for financial assistance so he could buy U.S. weapons? “It is crystal clear that by our unwillingness [to] manipulate a few million dollars we are permitting situation [to] deteriorate to point where chain reaction of nature that will constitute a major defeat for US policy in [the] Middle East . . . is highly probable.”

The Soviets partially confirmed the arms agreement with Cairo. Molotov happened to be in New York in the third week of September for the opening of the UN General Assembly. Dulles took the opportunity to sound him out on these reports of Soviets arms sales to Egypt. Although not mentioning Egypt by name, Molotov confirmed that arms negotiations might be going on with Arab countries but that “these conversations should not cause misunderstanding.” “The matter is being approached “on commercial grounds.”\(^4\) With Soviet confirmation—even if tepid—Dulles informed President Eisenhower and conferred with his brother, Allen, about whether to take a positive step to prevent Nasser from going through with it.\(^4\) The secretary of state was very worried. He thought the Israelis might launch a preemptive strike before the Soviet weapons arrived. Also always lurking in his mind was the possibility that once armed with Soviet weapons, the Egyptians might hit at Israel. Dulles approached the British and the French at the UN privately to send a message to their capitals to prepare for the new reality of Soviet involvement in the Middle East.

Dulles conferred with Eisenhower and suggested that this could be stopped only in Moscow. He thought that Nasser had no choice but to take the weapons. His army would overthrow him if he didn’t. But perhaps the Soviets could be scared into leaving the Middle East alone. Dulles told the president he would draft something for his consideration.

Allen Dulles thought that his brother was focusing on the wrong people. He doubted Moscow would respond to a protest from the president. The secretary of state and his brother disagreed on the handling of Nasser. Foster said the United States had offered arms to Nasser. Foster wondered if enough had been done. In any case, Foster believed that Nasser could not be turned around and sent a CIA officer to Cairo to speak directly to Nasser.

brie‌ly, accepting that a few days wouldn’t matter. Then he changed his mind and sent a CIA officer to Cairo to speak directly to Nasser.

Although there was no doubt that Nasser’s acceptance of MiGs from Moscow was a major turning point, he almost single-handedly built up this event into a revolutionary moment by exaggerating the size of the arms deal. Egyptian sources are very weak on Nasser’s thinking at this stage in the relationship with Moscow.\(^4\) On the basis of Soviet information, it appears likely that Nasser was not convinced in September 1955 that the opening to Moscow was anything but a one-shot event. He still wished to establish a close economic and political relationship with Washington. He said as much to Allen Dulles’s personal representative in Cairo, Kermit Roosevelt, on September 25.

Over the course of this long meeting—three and one-half hours—Nasser played the supplicant, asserting time and again that he thought he might be making a mistake by turning east for his supplies. Even though he had an agreement with Moscow for the delivery of eighty MiG-15s, he wasn’t about to end his game of playing the superpowers off each other. Nasser told Roosevelt that the Soviets had already sold him medium bombers, PT boats, and tanks, as well as the fighters and artillery pieces. Nasser claimed that the first shipment was expected in early October.\(^5\)

Like Allen Dulles, Kermit Roosevelt believed that despite the arms deal, Nasser remained “our best hope.” In that spirit, he recommended that Nasser make a public statement disavowing any aggressive intent. The CIA officer had not cleared this suggestion before the meeting with the State Department. Indeed, Allen Dulles also knew nothing about it and was later skeptical when Roosevelt reported the conversation to him. Dulles thought it wiser for Nasser to keep the weapons deal secret “in the hope that practical operations under [the] agreement will be less spectacular and possibly disappointing to [him]."\(^6\) Nasser liked the idea of a public statement regarding the Soviet deal and used Roosevelt to tell Washington that he wanted to meet with Foster Dulles soon to discuss the secretary of state’s peace proposals.

Nasser let the Soviets know the next day that he would be making a speech to announce the Czech sale.\(^7\) Saying nothing, of course, of the fact that the idea had come from the CIA, Nasser had his closest aide, Ali Sabri, tell the Soviet ambassador that in the speech he would explain Cairo’s decision to seek weapons from the Soviet bloc as a reaction to the threat from Israel. In response, Ambassador Solod suggested that Nasser not raise Israel and instead focus on the perceived need to strengthen the Egyptian Army. Nasser said he agreed. But he also admitted that he had something else in mind. He would suspend his arms deal with Moscow.
tension. Direct negotiations with Israel were out of the question, but he hoped for negotiations through Secretary Dulles.

Nasser's comments reminded the Soviets of the work they still had to do with him. He remained very tempted by the American option. Solod discouraged him from working with either Dulles brother. He reminded the Egyptian leadership of how poor the secretary of state's plan was for Egypt. "If you feel it necessary to have an intermediary," Solod suggested to Ali Sabri, "it would be better to turn to the United Nations or to some kind of neutral government." 53

That night at an arms fair in Cairo, amid a three-hour address, Nasser announced that his regime would buy weapons from the socialist world. Khrushchev's new policy of flexibility in the developing world had just scored its greatest victory.

Guatemala. Mr. President, Guatemala." Having just heard the news, the pro-American Egyptian ambassador to the United States Dr. Ahmed Hussein, who was then visiting Cairo, ran excitedly into Nasser's office at 9:00 A.M. on September 28. All he could think of was the Alfhelm and what had then befallen Arbenz. As this story was later told, Nasser's reaction was pure resolve. "To hell with Guatemala," Nasser said. 54

If indeed he ever said that, this was bluster to lift the morale of his inner circle. For Nasser himself worried about the consequences of his decision to buy from the East. He had tried to soften the blow on the eve of his announcement, but even his American advocates Roosevelt and Byroade had warned him that U.S. public opinion, at the very least, would react strongly to the news.

Although not yet trusting the Soviets, Nasser understood their utility and decided to move a little closer to them as he watched the Western reaction unfold. This movement took two forms. First, he decided that he would offer himself as a go-between in Moscow's efforts to seek diplomatic recognition from Saudi Arabia and Jordan. This was good politics because it meant he could monitor what Riyadh and Amman were up to and eventually reap the benefits of any deal that Moscow might strike with them. Egypt would thus become a power broker in the region. The other decision he made was to press the Soviets for some insurance: more military assistance, the existing orders faster, and possibly a deeper rhetorical commitment by Moscow to Egyptian security. Meanwhile he did not privately give up on Washington's reacting to the Czech deal with a massive deal of its own.

Solod immediately at his private apartment in Cairo. 55 The United States had just informed the Egyptians of the visit of a special representative, George Allen, who would probably wish to see Nasser as soon as he arrived on September 30. Nasser's sources told him that Allen would probably deliver an ultimatum to Egypt. If Egypt refused to break the deal with Czechoslovakia, the United States would encourage Israel to begin military action. Nasser warned the Soviets that Egypt would lose any war with Israel within ten days of its start.

Solod doubted the United States would deliver such an ultimatum. Nasser agreed. But he said that his decision to purchase weapons from the Soviet Union was "a turning point in history not only for Egypt, but for all Arab states. The struggle beginning now will be decisive for Egypt and the Arab world." The struggle against Western imperialism would be "sustained and hard." But Egypt had to go ahead. Nasser said that he had alerted the Egyptian Army to be prepared for "all possible surprises."

This discussion led to the big question: "What would the Soviet position be in the face of this U.S. threat to Egypt?" Nasser asked that Khrushchev be asked whether the USSR could supply the MiGs and the other elements of the September 12 agreement faster. "This would lift the morale of the army, which strongly supports the Czech arms purchase." Nasser stated that the army needed to see these weapons, "especially the planes and tanks." 56 To speed the delivery of aircraft, Nasser asked that they be flown directly to Cairo, by way of Albania or Yugoslavia.

Moscow responded quickly. The Soviet Union would not offer any military commitment to defend Egypt, but it promised political and moral support if the United States threatened Cairo. Solod conveyed this to Nasser directly on October 1. 57 Nasser listened closely to every word. Although he was disappointed, he tried not to show it. Other news proved even more disappointing. Moscow refused to send the planes faster to Cairo. The first shipment would come by boat at the end of October. To save face, Nasser responded that he did not privately give up on Washington's reacting to the Czech deal with a massive deal of its own.

A few days later Moscow reported that it was prepared to begin additional arms negotiations. Although they would take place in Prague, the Egyptians would have to discuss the purchase of torpedo boats and submarines with the Poles. Nasser preferred to continue discussions with the Czechs, but the Soviets insisted on changing the intermediaries for discussing naval weapons. "Czechoslovakia is a land-locked country," Solod explained. 59 The
CIA's

The Soviets also agreed to Nasser's requirement that not more than twenty trainers and aircraft engineers be sent with the MiG-15s.

Nasser was going to get the weapons, but as he had promised the CIA's Kermit Roosevelt and U.S. Ambassador Byroade, he did not intend to become a captive of Moscow. He had no desire to turn his back on Western assistance, nor did he want Soviet economic assistance if he could help it, given the political dimensions of accepting aid from Moscow. He could not dispel his phobia over letting Soviet citizens enter Egypt. He did not want engineers and economists swarming over Cairo, writing plans by day and engaging in subversive activities with local Communists by night. He didn't even trust the military types that had to accompany the instruction booklets with the MiG-15s.60

Nasser also feared that the Soviets would betray him to seek détente with the West. In mid-October, as a new round of arms negotiations began in Prague, Nasser asked if the Soviet Union would trade its new relationship with Egypt for an agreement on Germany. He had heard that the USSR might add its signature to the hated Tripartite Declaration of 1950, the Western initiative to control the arms race in the entire Middle East. Referring to the forthcoming foreign ministers' talks in Geneva, Nasser asked Solod on October 18 if there was any truth to U.S. press reports that a deal was in the works.61 When the Soviet ambassador said that this Anglo-American propaganda had no basis in fact, Nasser asked that the Soviets make a public statement disavowing any intention of joining the Tripartite Pact. He said this would be necessary to blunt U.S. efforts to discourage Syria and Saudi Arabia from buying weapons from the Soviet bloc. Nasser reported that the United States had just offered weapons, at no cost, to Lebanon. Nasser wanted the Soviets to start supplying other countries in the region. Worried that the Sudanese would otherwise look to the Anglo-Americans, he recommended that Moscow provide weapons to Khartoum. The Egyptian leader also asked Moscow to reconsider its policy toward the struggle for independence in French North Africa. Up to that point the Soviets had been passive, and Nasser, who admitted that Egypt was supplying the rebels, wanted Moscow to start sending material assistance to the Algerian and Tunisian freedom fighters.62 The Soviets did not respond to any of these requests. For the moment the Soviet Union had penetrated enough into the Middle East.

On October 29, 1955, a week after the Soviet ship Krasnodar delivered the first cargo of heavy weapons to Egypt, disaster struck the Soviet Navy at home.63 The 23,662-ton battleship Novorossisk, formerly the Italian Giulio Cesare, blew up mysteriously at anchor off the southern port of Sebastopol.64 The incident killed 599 sailors. It was the worst Soviet naval disaster since the summer of 1941, when mines claimed the destroyers Smely and Surovy and the German Navy sank the destroyers Gnevny, Tuchka, Taifun, and Tsiklon.65 For the Soviet leadership it was a wake-up call.

The tragedy provided Khrushchev with an opportunity to do some housecleaning in the navy. "Kuznetsov is apparently a dangerous person," he said, blaming the navy chief Admiral N. Kuznetsov, for the disaster. "[And] he is worthless as a commander-in-chief."66 Khrushchev and Kuznetsov had different dreams for the Soviet Navy. Kuznetsov wanted a navy that could project conventional force, similar in size and capability to the U.S. Navy. Khrushchev wanted to reduce the size of the navy, restricting future procurement to missile ships and submarines, rather than aircraft carriers. The disaster gave him the pretext to assist other countries in the region, Khrushchev was firing admirals in Moscow to ensure that the Soviet Navy remained small. There was no better proof that Khrushchev had only a political and economic strategy in 1955 for dominating the third world than the way he responded to the Novorossisk tragedy.

By 1957 the Soviet Navy would be cut from six hundred thousand to five hundred thousand men with 375 warships mothballed; orders for new cruisers were canceled, four uncompleted cruisers in Leningrad were scrapped.67 In strategic terms, the most important decision involved the future of the Soviet aircraft carrier. Stalin had authorized the building of aircraft carriers in 1938 and 1950, but events had conspired against each attempt.68 In 1941 the Nazis captured the Soviet shipyards where the carriers were supposed to be built. Stalin's death in 1953 effectively undermined the second push. Current plans had called for the construction of four carriers.69 Believing that the Soviet Union could not afford aircraft carriers, Khrushchev now scrapped them. Less interested in being able to project conventional force into regional conflicts, he was prepared to rely in future on the Soviet Union's ability to threaten the use of nuclear weapons.

The unfolding of the discussion of a new Soviet naval doctrine took place against the backdrop of yet another request for military assistance from Nasser. Claiming evidence of increased Israeli activities, in mid-November Cairo requested one hundred MiG-15s, instead of the eighty promised in
September, and five submarines instead of the two promised earlier in the fall. The issue came up at a Presidium meeting on November 16.

The Czech arms deal had become a personal triumph for Khrushchev, and he led the discussion of how Moscow should respond to Nasser. "It would be a risk," he said to his colleagues. But it was a risk worth taking. "We have pursued an independent policy [in the Middle East]," he said approvingly. The risk now was that Moscow might be dragged into a Middle Eastern war. There were rumors of an Israeli preemptive strike to prevent Egypt from absorbing the Soviet arms. Khrushchev opted for a controlled increase in weapons to Nasser. Submarines were out of the question, but the group approved increasing the number of MiG-15s to one hundred. Tanks were also not mentioned. Not long after Moscow would arrange the sale of the tanks Nasser had asked for in August, though not the top-of-the-line T-54s or even the T-34 from the early Cold War period. Egypt would receive the World War II–vintage IS-3. Nasser also eventually received a destroyer or two. "But submarines, we can't give him, not now," said Khrushchev.

One area where Soviet-Egyptian relations did not improve involved the building of the Aswan Dam. During the lengthy visit of an Egyptian economic delegation in the winter of 1954, the head of the delegation, General Hussein Ragab, the deputy minister of defense, asked if the Soviets would help with a large construction project envisioned for the Upper Nile. The Soviet response was vague but encouraging, and the delegation left, having negotiated the bases for a new trading relationship. By the summer it appeared Nasser had cold feet about asking for Soviet assistance. In financial terms, Nasser was looking for at least one billion rubles or one hundred million Egyptian pounds in credit, which could be given in the form of materials, equipment, and the salaries of Soviet technicians. The Soviets responded cautiously. This seemed like a lot of money, and before they would provide any assistance, they wanted a five- to six-person team to visit the site near Aswan. However, the Egyptian government refused to discuss granting visas to these Soviet engineers. Moscow concluded that Nasser opposed allowing a Soviet team inside his country for fear they would engage in harmful revolutionary activity.

Nasser had always preferred getting Western assistance for the dam project, and after the Czech arms deal was made public, he again maneuvered to exploit Western anxieties about Khrushchev's gains in the Middle East. "The West would subordinate economic questions to Cold War strategic considerations, Nasser began an ingenious campaign in the fall of 1955 to convince the West that its worst fears about Soviet intentions and capabilities in Egypt were correct. Animating this strategy was his decision to leverage Western fears of the spread of Soviet influence in the Middle East to obtain better terms for Western financing of the Aswan Dam project.

The centerpiece of this strategy was the Egyptian finance minister's November 1955 mission to the West. In London, Abdel Moneim el-Kaissouni told the British Foreign Office that his country could obtain financing from the Communist bloc if it was not satisfied with the offer made by the West. A few days later el-Kaissouni met with World Bank President Eugene Black and his deputy Gardner to discuss World Bank support for the Aswan Dam project.

Nasser timed his next salvo to strengthen el-Kaissouni's pitch. The day after the meeting with Black, Egyptian newspapers published a report based on a declaration by the minister for production, Hassan Ibrahim, that "Egypt received from Poland an offer to finance the high dam. The Egyptian government is studying this offer . . . no decision will be taken until the conclusion of the Minister of Finance's negotiations in the U.S." In the next few days el-Kaissouni met with high-level officials in the State Department. The strategy was working. Secretary of State Dulles announced to the National Security Council during the el-Kaissouni visit that "the Soviets had deliberately opened a new cold war front in the Near East."

But the coup de grace came from London. On November 27, as the Egyptian finance minister was winding up his American tour, Anthony Eden sent a flash cable to Dwight Eisenhower, stating, "Poland will act as a stooge in this case as Czech did for the arms." Eden asked for U.S. financial support to prevent Soviet involvement in constructing the dam. "I am convinced that on our joint success in excluding the Russians from this contract may depend the future of Africa." It would be a disaster for the West, Eden argued, if el-Kaissouni and Samir Hilmy, secretary-general of the High Dam Board, left the United States without conviction that an agreement would be reached.

This was all nonsense. Poland, neither on its own nor on behalf of the Soviet Union, had made no offer of assistance. Without access to Egyptian materials it is unclear to what extent the rumors and false intelligence that flowed to the American and British governments in the fall of 1955 were inspired by Egypt. Eden's warning stemmed from intelligence gathered by an allegedly highly placed British intelligence agent in Cairo, code-named Lucky Break. It seems likely that this was an Egyptian double agent, who supplied deception to trick the British into playing this helpful role in pushing the Americans.

Regardless of the extent of the Egyptian cloak-and-dagger activity, Nasser
caught both President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Eden in his trap. It is rare in international history to see cause and effect drawn so clearly. Eden's communique had an immediate effect. The next day, November 28, 1955, Eisenhower overcame his advisers' doubts about Nasser and the Aswan Dam, especially those of his Treasury secretary, George Humphrey, and decided to commit the United States to the project. Having no sense of its magnitude, he had not yet decided how much of a commitment to make. But Undersecretary of State Herbert Hoover recommended sending Robert Anderson, a well-respected Texas banker and former deputy secretary of defense, to Cairo to work with Nasser.

In Moscow these events were followed with amusement and slight bewilderment. The Kremlin cabled its ambassador in Cairo, Daniel Solod, to be sure he had never said to anyone that the Soviet bloc intended to participate in building the dam. Solod assured his bosses that he had said nothing and that there was no truth to these assertions. In Moscow the Foreign Ministry decided that Nasser had planted this information to drive a better deal with the West.

The West, for its part, did not consider the possibility that it had been duped by Nasser. Fearful that it was competing with Moscow on the project, the Eisenhower administration on December 1 approved a financial assistance package for it. It was assumed the project would take ten years. The administration decided to support a World Bank loan of $200 million with an additional $200 million from the United States and Great Britain, 80 percent of which would come from Washington. Two weeks later the United States published an official communique on the el-Kaissouni visit, which announced U.S. support for the Aswan Dam project. As he boarded the flight from London to Cairo, el-Kaissouni confirmed that the West had committed $420 million to the $960 million cost of the construction of the high dam. Nasser's gambit seemed to have worked.

The culmination of Khrushchev's opening to the third world in 1955 was his five-week, three-nation tour of South Asia with Nikolai Bulganin in late November and December. His goal was less to educate himself about these areas, though he wished to learn about these countries and their populations, than to improve the standing of the Soviet Union there.

In India, Burma, and Afghanistan, Khrushchev encountered countries with different regional and cultural needs. In each case, he saw the opportunity to use Russia's arms to further its influence in the developing world. Khrushchev viewed India thorough an ideological lens, one that inspired him to tell his colleagues in the Kremlin that the situation in India was "Kerensky-like." The implication was that Jawaharlal Nehru was the interim bourgeois leader of a state headed for socialism, the historical role filled by Aleksandr Kerensky in Russia in 1917.

Although he was convinced that India was in a prerevolutionary condition, Khrushchev was in no hurry to see the Nehru era end. He was disappointed by the work of the Indian Communist Party. Moscow's closest allies in the subcontinent were guilty of taking a hard-line sectarian approach to the Nehru government, stressing the overthrow of the elected regime instead of exploiting Nehru's commitment to industrialization, public education, and state property to form an alliance among the population. Flipping through Indian Communist magazines during the trip, Khrushchev found them unappealing and inflexible.

Khrushchev did not want local Communist parties to impede the improvement of relations between the Soviet Union and these regimes. In particular he had high hopes for building very strong relations with India. In mid-December Khrushchev decided that he and Bulganin should return there before heading home to Moscow. The original travel plans had the men ending their tour in Afghanistan. Khrushchev, however, wanted to give a major foreign policy address that would demonstrate to the Indians that he shared some of their priorities in foreign policy. Characteristic of Khrushchev, he did so without seeking any staff support from the Foreign Ministry or even the Central Committee. It was his judgment that Moscow needed to go on record in support of the Indian claims to Kashmir. He also wished to express Soviet approval for the recovery of Portuguese Goa, one of the tiny remnants of the Portuguese Empire located on the west coast of India.

India was not the only place where Khrushchev believed the Soviet Union could make a profitable political investment. When the Burmese leader U Nu had visited Moscow earlier in the year, he had commented on the comfort of the II-148 that the Russians had lent him for the trip. Khrushchev decided to illustrate his commitment to better relations by making a gift of a plane. Meanwhile Khrushchev and Bulganin intended making an even larger investment in better relations with Mohammed Daoud, the prime minister of Afghanistan.

Throughout the trip the two Soviet leaders kept in contact with the Presidium by cable. During the negotiations with the Afghans the travelers had sent an urgent cable requesting a policy decision on selling arms to this state. Afghanistan in 1955 was a feudal monarchy with no Communist Party leadership.
to speak of, let alone a progressive united front. The motivation behind the offer was strategic. Khrushchev wanted to build up his relations in the third world and also wanted an additional ally on the Soviet border. Afghanistan fitted both objectives. The recent happy experience with Egypt gave reason to believe that the entire process could proceed smoothly.

In Moscow, however, Kaganovich and Molotov reacted badly to the idea of giving military assistance to a government that besides being non-Communist was a traditional monarchy with no pretense to progressivism. “This sets a precedent,” said Kaganovich, fearing that the Soviets would find themselves inundated with requests for aid. 83

Mikoyan, who chaired the meeting, joined Malenkov in favor of Khrushchev’s evident desire to consummate the deal. Neither man made an ideological case for supporting these governments. Their rationale was pure realism: “We should work to attract Afghanistan to our side,” said Malenkov. And Mikoyan emphasized the general utility of supporting developing countries: “We will have to render assistance to some states, if we wish to enter into more serious competition with the USA. From the point of view of state interests, it is necessary to render assistance.” Malenkov and Mikoyan carried the day for the Khrushchev forces. In mid-December the Soviet government decided to offer Afghanistan a hundred-million-dollar aid package. When Khrushchev got back, he made sure that it included a shipment of arms. 84

Returning home on December 21, Khrushchev had much to show for his efforts in the third world. Since February the Soviet government had reached trade agreements with Indonesia, India, Burma, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Syria. Of those countries, Egypt, Syria, and Afghanistan were to be the recipients of military as well as economic aid.

These achievements in the developing world capped a remarkable year for Khrushchev. Since January he had supplanted both Malenkov and Molotov, and Soviet foreign policy reflected his priorities. Moscow had reestablished good relations with Yugoslavia, signed a peace treaty with Austria, and opened the diplomatic door to the Federal Republic of Germany. John Foster Dulles’s efforts to force damaging Soviet concessions on the German question had failed, with the initiative shifting to Moscow in the pursuit of détente and disarmament. In the months to come, however, Khrushchev came to learn that he could not always control international events as easily as he had in 1955. The initiative might not always stay with him.

In the diplomatic revolution that Khrushchev started in 1955, crises or moments of international tension were not expected to be useful for achieving Soviet goals. By the summer of 1956 Gamal Abdel Nasser had set in motion a series of events that tested Nikita Khrushchev’s new foreign policy and confronted the Kremlin with its first international crisis since the Korean War. Khrushchev ultimately derived a different, and more dangerous, lesson from surprises in the Middle East.

Nasser and his Egyptian followers had discussed the idea of nationalizing the Suez Canal for a number of years. Although the canal was wholly within Egyptian territory, it was controlled by European shareholders in the Universal Suez Marine Canal Company (Suez Canal Company) under a ninety-nine-year lease that came into effect in 1869. The revolutionaries in the Egyptian Army, the self-named Free Officers, who had overthrown King Farouk in 1952, had vowed to break the lease, which symbolized for them a huge colonial chain around Egypt’s neck. But Nasser only decided on July 21, after what one confidant recalled as a long and sleepless night, to make 1956 the year that the lease would finally be broken. 1 The decision was in large part a reaction to the U.S. government’s announcement on July 19 that it would not finance Nasser’s pet public works project, the huge Aswan High Dam. The decision both surprised and humiliated the Egyptian president, who had expected to reach a deal with Washington.

For six months Nasser had played a high-stakes game with Western bankers and finance ministers to secure funding for the dam project. He disliked the World Bank’s financial reporting requirements and worried about other constraints that the United States and the United Kingdom, which was also a party to the dam-financing negotiations, might be able to impose. With these hesitations in mind, Nasser kept pushing for better terms from the West. The Soviets had refused to make a serious offer to help Egypt build the