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. 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.

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. 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.

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
Nasser, with military threats that could turn into an actual war, if we don’t use our resources with caution." The British government and a group of middle-class French citizens were the principal shareholders in the canal. Besides putting their property rights at risk, the nationalization would likely be interpreted by the Europeans as a threat to their strategic interests. Of the 122 million tons of cargo shipped through the canal each year, more than 60 percent was oil. Indeed, two-thirds of all the oil imported by Europe came via Suez. In calculating the odds of war, Nasser assumed that the British rather than the French were the more likely to initiate a rash military response. The canal was the jugular vein that fed Britain’s Asian colonies.

Nasser took pains to restrict the number of people who would know about his plan before he was ready to announce it publicly. Besides his inner circle, Nasser informed a small group of Egyptian military officers whose job it would be to occupy the headquarters of the Suez Canal Company in Port Said after the announcement. The officers were instructed to listen to Nasser’s speech on the radio and seize the building the moment he referred by name to Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French visionary who had built the canal.

Nasser only brought his cabinet into his confidence a matter of hours before he spoke. The news stunned the assembled ministers, some of whom immediately tried to persuade him not to go through with the plan for fear of British and French reprisals. Nasser assured them that he had already calculated the risks and that the British prime minister, Anthony Eden, the key player on the European side, would be too weak-willed to go to war.

After the meeting broke up, Nasser gave his speech, which was broadcast from Alexandria to millions listening on radios throughout Egypt and the Arab world. He spoke with confidence, and there was no masking the bitterness in his voice. He cited every slight ever visited upon the Egyptian people in the modern era. When he arrived at the portion of his speech that railed at foreign financiers, especially the World Bank president Eugene Black, Nasser uttered the command: “I started to look at Mr. Black, who was sitting on a chair, and I saw him in my imagination as Ferdinand de lesseps.” At that moment three hundred miles away in Port Said Egyptian commandos occupied the headquarters of the canal company. As this action was taking place, Nasser revealed to his listeners what he had just ordered, “Today, O citizens, the Suez Canal Company has been nationalized.” In a bid to take a little of the sting out of this announcement for his Western audience, Nasser promised compensation for the shareholders.

Nikita Khrushchev was as surprised as Nasser’s Arab audience when he learned of the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Moscow had not received any advance warning from the Egyptians. Barely five weeks earlier Molotov’s replacement as Soviet foreign minister, Dmitri Shepilov, had been Nasser’s guest in Cairo, and though there had been discussions of arms deliveries and economic assistance, the Egyptian president had not alluded in any way to the possibility that he would take on the Western powers in 1956. Nasser was expected to make his first trip to the Soviet Union in August, and the Egyptians had not even suggested Suez as an agenda item.

At the time of Shepilov’s visit in June Nasser still believed that he could come to an arrangement with the United States over the financing of the Aswan Dam and had not yet decided to seize the canal. But because the official Egyptian silence had continued even after Nasser had changed his mind, the Soviets were right to believe they had been actively deceived. On the morning before Nasser’s speech, Egypt’s foreign minister, Mohammed Fawzi, had visited the Soviet ambassador in Cairo and said nothing about the Suez Canal. He had talked instead about the dam project and made the strange request that Moscow pretend that the Soviet Union would help Cairo pay for it. In the week following the U.S. announcement on July 19 that it
would not help Nasser build the dam, rumors had swirled in Cairo that Moscow intended to pick up the slack. These rumors were untrue—Moscow remained as dubious of the Aswan project as ever—and its Foreign Ministry spokesmen had immediately denied there was any deal. Through Fawzi, Nasser asked the Kremlin to stop denying these rumors. Although Fawzi had not hinted at any of this, it later became clear to the Soviets that as Nasser prepared to seize the canal, he needed to use Moscow as political cover. He neither wanted the Western powers nor the Egyptian people to suspect that he was nationalizing the canal out of weakness, not strength.

Whatever Nasser’s motives for keeping Khrushchev in the dark, his announcement caught the Soviets flatfooted. The Kremlin had no policy prepared for what to do if Egypt took the canal and had hoped not to need one. Khrushchev had made the Kremlin’s relationship with Nasser the centerpiece of his strategy of building alliances in the third world and of staking a claim to influence in the Middle East. However, he had not intended to support Nasser’s dreams of establishing Egyptian hegemony throughout the region. To discourage any impression both in the West and in Cairo that it did, Moscow had ever since been counseling caution to the Egyptians. Indeed one of Shepilov’s objectives in June had been to reinforce the message that Cairo should tread carefully in its foreign policy. Egyptian requests for the most modern Soviet weaponry, the T-54 tank and the MiG-19 jet fighters, suggested to Moscow that Cairo might have aggressive intentions toward Israel. “It is especially important now,” the Soviet foreign minister had advised Nasser’s minister of war, Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, “not to allow the imperialists to provoke a military conflict between Arabs and Israelis, which the imperialists would hope to use to improve their position in the Near East.”22 Nasser’s decision to nationalize the canal ran completely counter to Moscow’s advice.

As far as the Kremlin was concerned, the decision was also exceptionally ill timed. The last thing Moscow needed in July 1956 was another problem. That summer Khrushchev and his colleagues were absorbed by events in Eastern Europe for which Khrushchev felt some responsibility.

Five months earlier, in a keynote address to nearly fifteen hundred Communist leaders from fifty-six countries at the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev had decried Stalin’s crimes and launched a purge of Stalinism. “Stalin was devoted to the cause of socialism, but in a barbaric way,” he told members of the Presidium before the congress.23 “He ruined the Party. He was not a Marxist. He erased all that is holy in a human being. He bent everything to his caprices.”

The Presidium had debated for two months before deciding to proceed with this speech. Khrushchev vacillated over how critical he should be of Stalin. “We should think carefully about the wording,” noted Khrushchev’s ally Dmitri Shepilov, echoing his concerns, “not to cause harm.”24 The then Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, had opposed any attack on Stalin, but even the Presidium’s reformers, Khrushchev among them, worried that anti-Communists might try to use these criticisms to undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet bloc. As a result, Khrushchev hoped to restrict knowledge of the speech only to party leaders in the socialist world.

By May, partly thanks to the Eisenhower administration, which acquired a copy from Israeli intelligence and gave it to the New York Times, the actual speech was in newspapers around the world and was causing widespread instability in the Kremlin’s European empire. What had started out as top-down reform in the Soviet Union, announced by Khrushchev himself, had been transformed by the peculiar conditions in Eastern Europe into a grassroots push for more political freedom and democracy. The movement spread even faster because of the inability of the leaders in these countries, many of whom had been chosen by Stalin, to manage the process that Khrushchev had unleashed. In the first weeks after the Twentieth Party Congress Stalinists in Moscow’s client states in Eastern Europe tried vainly to keep a lid on these reformist pressures.

In the summer of 1956 Poland appeared to be closest to a political explosion. Polish leader Edward Ochab, who had described the effect of Khrushchev’s secret speech as “like being hit over the head with a hammer,” was proving himself to be especially inept at handling the new political environment.25 In late June the Polish government had overreacted to a demonstration for “Bread and Freedom” in Poznan. Fifty-six workers died and more than three hundred were wounded in clashes with Polish troops.

The situation seemed nearly as volatile in Hungary, where the struggle for reform was taking place within the Communist Party itself. In June Soviet Presidium member Mikhail Suslov had been sent to Budapest to plead for party unity. When that didn’t reduce political tensions, Presidium member Anastas Mikoyan followed in July with instructions to force a wholesale leadership change in the country.26

The Kremlin got its first official word from an Egyptian on its new Middle Eastern problem the morning after the nationalization.27 The Egyptian ambassador in Moscow, Mohammed el-Kouni, painted the situation in alarming colors for the Soviets. “At the moment all [the Western powers] are mobilizing against us,” he explained to Foreign Minister Shepilov.28 Cairo assumed that the
war would begin with Israel, though Egypt expected its ultimate enemy would be Great Britain. "Once Israel initiates action from her side," said the ambassador, "the British will embrace her." El-Kouni did not specify what form that embrace would take, but he made clear the further assumption that the British would receive covert assistance from the United States. Referring to the Central Intelligence Agency's role in the overthrow of the Iranian nationalist leader Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953, he warned that "in the past the USA has propagated the illusion that it could accomplish in Egypt what it did in Iran."

Despite these fears, Cairo limited itself to asking the Russians for moral support. "If you [gave this]," el-Kouni explained, "then you would be helping not simply the Egyptian people; but other Arab countries as well who are also waiting for this support." Shepilov, who shared Khrushchev's passion for broadening ties with the third world, promised to forward el-Kouni's suggestions to the Kremlin immediately. Despite the lack of any formal instructions on this point, Shepilov felt confident in adding that "the Soviet government would do all that was necessary so that the measures taken by the Egyptian government in nationalizing the Suez Canal would not lead to unnecessary difficulties for her." This was the answer that Nasser had hoped to receive.

The urgent message from the Egyptian government had no discernible effect on the Kremlin. Khrushchev did not call an emergency meeting of the Presidium to discuss Egyptian concerns, nor were Soviet forces in the southwestern republics of the Soviet Union or in Bulgaria, the closest satellite state to Egypt, put on alert. There was no sense of crisis or imminent confrontation in the Soviet capital. Instead a very comfortable assumption took hold that the Western powers would reluctantly, but inevitably, accept the change at Suez as yet another sign of decolonization.

**British Prime Minister** Anthony Eden learned of the nationalization of the Suez Canal late in the evening of July 26, as he was playing host at a state dinner for King Faisal of Iraq and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Said. Nuri, who was as pro-Western as any Arab leader in the 1950s, spoke for many in the room when he privately told the British foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, "You have only one course of action open and that is to hit, hit now, and hit hard... If [Nasser] is left alone, he will finish all of us." Eden hardly needed any tutoring from the Iraqis on Nasser. He considered himself an expert on the Middle East and had long since become a hawk on Anglo-Egyptian relations. In Eden's eyes Nasser was the "Muslim Mussolini," a vainglorious man who was intent on expansion at the expense of British interests. In 1938 Eden had resigned from the Chamberlain government over appeasement of Italy's flamboyant Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, and he was not about to appease Nasser over the Suez Canal.

There was the sting of recent lessons behind Eden's resolve. In recent years Nasser had become a delicate political problem for the British prime minister. In 1954, when he was Churchill's foreign secretary, Eden had taken a risk and negotiated the British military pullout from its base near the canal over the objections of the diehard imperialists along the back benches of his conservative government. From that point on his opponents in the British Conservative Party jumped on Nasser's every move as proof that Eden had misjudged him. As Eden's biographer Robert Rhodes James concludes, this political vulnerability did not lead Eden to seek the approval of the old-line imperialist, but it did make him see Nasser's actions as personal betrayals. The Soviet arms deal in September 1955 had been a shock to Eden. Jordan's decision to fire the British commander of King Hussein's army a few months later, an act associated with Nasser's meddling in the affairs of other Arab countries, came as yet another blow to Eden's policy in the Middle East. The nationalization of the Suez Canal was the last straw.

Eden thought he had no choice but to deal swiftly and harshly with the Egyptian leader. Nasser "stands on our windpipe," he declared to an emergency session of his inner circle that convened after the Iraqis and the other dinner guests had left. Still wearing his formal white tie from the state dinner, the prime minister projected confidence and decisiveness. He had invited the British chiefs of staff as well as the local representatives of his closest foreign allies, the French ambassador and the U.S. chargé d'affaires, to this late-night session to hear his plans. He hoped that the French and the Americans would participate in a coordinated response to Nasser's challenge.

The prime minister was determined to force a reversal of the nationalization. His immediate objective was to shut down the canal and deny Egypt any financial gain. The British subjects who worked for the Suez Canal Company would be encouraged to stay away from their jobs, and he hoped that other nationals would also compel their citizens to walk off the job. Ultimately Eden assumed that the major users of the canal, but not including the Soviets or the Egyptians themselves, would need to meet to discuss how to formally take the canal away from Nasser. Eden did not mince words about what "taking away" the canal might entail. In front of the French and American representatives, he instructed his military chiefs to produce as soon as possible a report on what forces would be needed to retake the canal and how the operation could be implemented.
An immediate attack was not feasible. Between them the British and the French had less than one airborne division in the Middle East, while British estimates assumed it would take at least three divisions to capture and hold the canal. A successful attack would require the movement of forces to the eastern Mediterranean. France offered to redeploy some of its forces in Algeria for this operation but understood that even more were required. On its own initiative, Paris began discussions with the Israelis to increase the firepower available for the strike.

In the meantime Eisenhower believed that the worst thing the United States could do was to rush into military discussions with the British and the French. He and Dulles agreed that the solution had to come from a much broader group of states, it would have to involve diplomacy, and any decision to use force would have to await further developments in the Middle East. Domestic politics reinforced Eisenhower’s characteristic caution. It was a presidential election year in the United States—election day was November 3.
August 1 was a great day for Nikita Khrushchev. He was the star of the dedication ceremony for Moscow's Lenin Stadium, the largest sports facility in Europe and one of the largest in the world. He decided to use this occasion to go on record in support of Nasser and Egypt. Since Shepilov's meeting with the Egyptian ambassador, Moscow had provided the requested rhetorical support. The Soviet government used Pravda to indicate its recognition of Nasser's right to nationalize the canal, and the newspaper had reprinted the text of Nasser's Alexandria speech on July 28. But there was nothing to suggest that Moscow considered the Suez matter to be a crisis demanding a broad political and diplomatic campaign. No private communiqués were sent from Moscow to Cairo, and Khrushchev had said nothing publicly.

Moscow's initial response had not pleased Nasser, who had expected more from the Soviets. Earlier on August 1 the Egyptian ambassador had delivered a message from Nasser to Khrushchev in which Nasser had pledged to keep the canal open and to provide "free use" by all countries. It seemed that Cairo feared that the Soviet Union's low-key response reflected some skepticism over Nasser's willingness to insulate the canal from politics. There is no evidence that Moscow had raised this matter with Cairo, but Nasser wished to be sure that Khrushchev had no doubts on that score. In handing over the message, his representative in Moscow assured the Russians that Egypt was making every effort "not to give these powers [Britain, France, and the United States] a way or justification to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs." Cheered on by tens of thousands of Soviet citizens, Khrushchev took the opportunity of the speech to slip in some comments about the developing Suez situation in an effort to calm Nasser. "Nationalization of the Suez Canal," said Khrushchev, "was . . . within the competence of a sovereign government like the Egyptian government." Cautioning the French and the British not to overreact, Khrushchev added: "It must be emphasized that the Econo-10m, the State is not seeking to nationalize the Canal. "The Soviet Union, being directly interested in maintenance of free navigation of the Suez Canal and considering the declaration of the Egyptian government that the Suez Canal will be free for all, concludes there is no basis for this display of nervousness and distress in this connection."40

Having an incomplete understanding of what was happening in the Western capitals, Khrushchev did not share the nervousness of his Egyptian ally and believed these words to be enough. "We have no evidence," a Foreign Ministry official told the Egyptian ambassador on the day of Khrushchev's speech, "that the Western powers are preparing a military intervention." Soviet intelligence had not detected the bellicose discussions in Paris and London. However, the KGB provided the Kremlin leadership with an interesting window through which to watch how the United States reacted to the developing situation in the Middle East. From at least April 1956, the Soviet had so thoroughly bugged the U.S. Embassy in Moscow that the Kremlin could make copies of virtually every telegraphic message it sent or received.42 These stolen confidential messages confirmed for the Soviets that the United States was not taking a confrontational position on Suez, and Khrushchev and the Kremlin leadership assumed that no Western military action could take place against Egypt without U.S. participation. Khrushchev did not yet know this, but this rich source of top secret information on U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union ultimately proved an unhelpful guide to developments in the Middle East.

Because of its sensitivity, the Kremlin merely hinted to the Egyptians the source of its confidence. Cairo was told not to discount the possibility that the United States would play a peaceful role in Egypt's dispute with the Western Europeans. "The United States follows a somewhat different line on the Suez question," a Soviet official explained to the Egyptian ambassador. In an effort to be reassuring, Moscow put forward the theory that economic reasons would prevent Washington from embracing British or French extremism. "U.S. oil companies understand," the Soviet official continued, "that there are enormous oil reserves in the Middle East and that any extreme measures taken against Egypt would be bad considering the mood of the Arabs is very fixed."44

The message that came back from London at the end of July after the U.S. delegation had met with British officials was not what Eisenhower had wanted. The British government and especially Eden were determined "to
drive Nasser out of Egypt.

Not only did London seek to reverse the nationalization, but overthrowing Nasser was the principal goal of British action. The Americans were told that the British had begun planning the invasion of Egypt, which would take six weeks to set up. To lend some legitimacy to the attack, the British were planning a conference of the key Western users of the canal to present Nasser with an ultimatum he could be expected to refuse.

The news from London dismayed the U.S. president. Eisenhower assumed the Egyptians could be defeated easily but then worried about the reaction across the Arab world to a British attack before there was any serious effort at negotiating with Nasser. He foresaw sabotaged pipelines and terrorist attacks against British troops and other Western targets. "The British," Eisenhower told his senior advisers, "were out of date in thinking of this as a mode of action in the present circumstances."

Concerned that his British allies were seriously underestimating the consequences of a war, Eisenhower sent the secretary of state to London with a proposal for a diplomatic solution. Dulles, who arrived on August 1, brought an American proposal designed to begin the process of establishing international management of the canal. Instead of a bogus conference, Washington suggested bringing together all twenty-four original signatories and their successor states to the seventy-year-old international treaty that governed use of the Suez Canal. In 1888 the principal great powers—Russia, Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, France, and Germany—had met in Constantinople (now Istanbul) to draft an agreement to ensure the free use of this strategic waterway. The British had closed the canal in World War II, but since the war Egypt had been the principal violator of the Constantinople Convention by its refusal to allow Israeli ships to traverse the canal.

While assuring the British that it was the U.S. intention to see Nasser weakened and the nationalization undermined, Dulles refused to commit the United States to any military planning or even to the military option. Reflecting his differences with Eisenhower, Dulles also explained that the administration shared the ultimate goal of removing Nasser, but he believed this could be achieved diplomatically and through the skillful use of world public opinion. The French and the British agreed to the proposed conference, and Dulles assured them that it would approve a set of resolutions designed to force Nasser to turn administration of the canal over to an international board that would set tolls, undertake proper maintenance of the canal, and ensure open access to all countries. Egypt would be promised a percentage of the tolls, but its share would be determined by the international board.

Despite his usual hard-line approach to the Kremlin, Dulles believed that the Soviets, whose predecessor government had signed the Constantinople Convention, would have to be invited to this conference; otherwise it would lack all legitimacy. He assured the British and French that the invitation would not imply real consultation or cooperation. The conference could be organized, he explained, so as to "insulate the Russians." The powers would go into the conference assuming what they expected to get out of it, and the Soviets would have no choice but to accept or stay in the minority. The United States also believed that Egypt would have to be invited.

On August 2, Great Britain, France, and the United States jointly issued a statement proposing a conference of all parties to the Constantinople Convention and other nations with substantial interest in the maritime trade carried through the canal. The meeting would begin in London on August 16.

Although temporarily slowed by Washington’s insistence at exploring diplomatic options, Eden instructed his military planners to continue preparing for an attack on Egypt. Initially the British military chiefs had planned a September 15 attack after an August 1 ultimatum. Eden wanted them to understand that the London Conference was merely going to alter the timetable of the ultimatum. The prime minister still expected military action in September. He assumed—and hoped—Nasser would reject the conference’s demands.

The formal invitation to the London Conference, which the Soviets received on August 3, had the effect of finally attracting serious attention in the Kremlin to the situation in the Middle East. It also prompted Nasser to make his first significant demand of the Kremlin since the nationalization speech. Hours before the Presidium met to discuss what to do about the invitation, Nasser sent word through the Soviet Embassy in Cairo that he hoped the Soviets would refuse to attend. Egypt had no intention of participating in any conference organized, sponsored, or otherwise choreographed by the British and hoped that its close ally the Soviet Union would act the same way. If there had to be an international discussion, Nasser preferred that it be held at the United Nations.

"Maybe Nasser is right," Khrushchev announced to his Kremlin colleagues at their first formal discussion of the Suez question since July 26. "Who is choosing the participants?" He then answered his own question: "England, France, and the USA. We shouldn’t go to this. He’s right." He also agreed with Nasser that the General Assembly of the United Nations would be a better venue for discussing the nationalization of the canal. Khrushchev wanted to redefine the question, to broaden it, so that Egypt would no longer be the...
center of attention. The debate should be "not only about the Suez Canal but on other canals and straits."

Khrushchev assumed that the London Conference could be safely boycotted without jeopardizing Egypt. So long as the issue did not become a test of wills between the superpowers, Khrushchev was confident it could be resolved diplomatically at the United Nations. Especially encouraging to him was the evidence that the United States seemed to be acting as a check on the ambitions of its allies. In the meantime Khrushchev believed the Soviet Union had to show self-restraint. On his desk were proposals for a new nuclear test series. He suggested to his colleagues in the Kremlin that these tests be postponed until international tensions had subsided. Khrushchev also wanted Cairo to be especially cautious. The Soviet ambassador was to advise Nasser to reaffirm in public Egyptian neutrality in the Cold War and to resist denouncing the 1954 Suez Base agreement with London, even though it provided for British intervention in the canal in an emergency.

Over the next two days, however, Moscow's confidence in this policy of self-restraint and disengagement eroded slightly. News of what seemed to be British and French preparations for war focused Khrushchev on the need for the Soviet Union to press for diplomatic action. The British were doing so much in the open that the Kremlin did not need spies to see that Nasser's worst fears might actually occur. British newspapers carried reports of naval preparations at Portsmouth. Three British aircraft carriers, HMS Theseus, Bulwark, and Ocean, were due to set sail in the first part of the week. As of Sunday, August 5, the Royal Army's sixteenth Independent Parachute Brigade would be on board the Theseus. The army also appeared to be reinforcing its base in Cyprus. The Somerset Light Infantry, the Suffolk Regiment, and two other infantry battalions had been ordered to move there. In Cyprus they were to be joined by the Royal Marines' No. 42 Commando, the Life Guards, and the third Battalion, Grenadier Guards. The War Office would only admit to these being "precautionary military measures."

Nasser was also becoming a concern for Moscow. Ambassador Evgeny Kiselev informed Moscow that Nasser was threatening the United States with a reign of terror if Eisenhower did not accept the nationalization of the Suez Canal. "I told the American Ambassador," Nasser confided to Kiselev, "that the entire canal has been mined and it and all of the Suez Canal personnel could be destroyed within five minutes, if some kind of aggression took place against Egypt." Nasser added that he had also threatened the United States with sabotage against all oil producers in the Middle East, "and especially in Kabul, Bahrain and Aden." If these comments were not enough of a symbol of Nasser's brinkmanship—at least as described by him to the Soviets—the Egyptian leader mentioned that he was considering tearing up the 1954 Anglo-Egyptian accord under which the British had dismantled their military base in Suez.

With the probability suddenly higher that either the British or Nasser might lash out, Khrushchev thought that Moscow had no choice but to involve itself directly as a mediator. Despite having signaled to Nasser on August 3 that the Soviet Union would not send a delegation to the London Conference, Khrushchev now concluded that the Soviets would have to attend. On August 5 he called a special session of the Presidium to discuss sending a team headed by Foreign Minister Shepilov.

Khrushchev took charge of determining how this about-face would be explained to Nasser. At the August 5 meeting he dictated the guts of a letter that laid out his reasoning to Nasser. The Soviet assessment of the political situation "remains as it was," he explained, but because of the receipt of new information, "we are sending our representatives [to London] to foil their military schemes." Khrushchev hoped that in light of British military activities, Nasser would also change his mind about sending a delegation to London. "You might want to send your Minister of Foreign Affairs. But that is up to you to decide." Khrushchev also wanted to shape Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's opinion of the conference. Nehru's standing was very high in the developing world, and it could be expected that as the leader of a former British colony, he would back Egypt's right to nationalize the Suez Canal. The Indians had been invited to the conference but had as yet not decided whether to attend.

The rest of the Soviet leadership blessed Khrushchev's recommendation, but below the surface there was real disagreement over how to prepare for London. Khrushchev, like Eden, had a Nasser problem at home. Many in the Kremlin doubted that Nasser would be able to manage this crisis, but Khrushchev was inclined to support the Egyptian leader. A number of Kremlin insiders and Khrushchev himself believed that Nasser had mishandled the nationalization. His rhetoric had been too strident, and the action seemed rash and ill-prepared. Nasser had issued a statement acknowledging the right of all nations to use the canal, but the Kremlin knew that Egypt's policy of not letting Israel use the canal had created international suspicion that the canal would not be insulated from Egyptian politics. Moreover, even if the canal were protected from Cairo's whims, some Kremlin chieftains suspected that Nasser would not be able to administer it. The experience of discussing the Aswan Dam with the Egyptians had left an impression that their ambitions
were sometimes greater than their technical competence. Aware of these misgivings at home, Khrushchev understood that he had to make his way carefully through the coming diplomatic engagements.

Six days later the Foreign Ministry circulated first drafts of what Shepilov might say at the conference. It suggested that the Soviet representative make three points: Egypt had a right to nationalize the canal, the users of the canal had a right to expect Egypt to respect the 1888 Constantinople treaty on freedom of passage, and the London Conference was the wrong place to decide how to resolve this problem diplomatically. Forty-five countries used the canal in a significant way, and the three Western powers had invited only twenty-four of them. With the exception of the Soviet Union, the socialist world and some key neutral states had been excluded from the conference to ensure that the body would pass resolutions weakening Egyptian control of the canal. Moscow's goal was to force a second, broader conference at which the Western powers might be outvoted by countries more sympathetic to Egyptian sovereignty.

When the Kremlin met again on August 9 and 11 to review the Foreign Ministry's work, disagreements over Nasser broke out into the open. In November 1955 Khrushchev had acknowledged to his colleagues that arms sales to Egypt were "risky" before pushing for more of them. In light of the recent developments in the Middle East, his colleagues began to reconsider the reward brought by these risks. Malenkov, who remained on the Presidium despite his loss of authority in early 1955, voiced the concern of those who believed that the Soviet Union should not tie itself too closely to Nasser: "We should never be the prisoners of Nasser's political enthusiasms." He complained that there were too many references to Egyptian rights in the proposed statements. In response, Khrushchev tried to shift the discussion away from Nasser. Khruishchev believed the Western powers were inclined to use force because they misjudged Soviet intentions in the region. "Evidently," he explained to his colleagues, "the West thinks the following: we [the USSR] wish to deny them their rights under the [1888] convention, we wish to swallow Egypt to seize the Canal." Khrushchev wanted to defeat these notions by showing that the Soviet Union was seeking a middle road between Egypt and the Western powers. "We understand the anxiety of the English and the French," he said; "we are no less interested [in this matter] than the English. What is needed: freedom of passage." Defense Minister Zhukov came to Khrushchev's assistance in the debate. He accepted that a misunderstanding of Soviet intentions lay behind the aggressiveness that the British and French had been exhibiting in the last two weeks. "They suspect," said Zhukov, "that we want to win a war without having to fight it."

In the days that followed, the KGB provided intelligence that strengthened Moscow's resolve to use the London discussions to persuade the French and the British to find a peaceful solution to their concerns. From a source in the French Defense Ministry, the Kremlin learned of a signed agreement between France and Britain to launch a joint military attack on Egypt in the near future. According to this agreement, French and British forces would occupy the Suez Canal after the London Conference. The source explained that the United States would not attempt to stop the Anglo-French attack. Although the source spoke of a hardening of the British and French position on the use of force against Nasser, it did not rule out the possibility that France would be happy if it could get its way through blackmail and intimidation.

Apparent confirmation that the United States might not be playing the moderating role with its allies that Khrushchev had assumed came from a different confidential source. On the evening of August 13 the KGB reported on U.S. ambassador Charles Bohlen's conversation with Israeli Ambassador Yosef Avidar at the Leningrad airport while the ambassadors were awaiting their respective flights. Avidar told Bohlen, who was leaving to join the U.S. delegation in London, that he and his government were extremely anxious about the situation in the Suez Canal Zone and its long-term consequences. Surrounded by hostile Arab nations, Israel could not last a year if Nasser were to close the canal to all but Soviet warships and those of Egyptian allies. What made this report so startling was not the Israeli's professed anxiety but Bohlen's response, as picked up by the KGB.

"The Canal question is far from decided," Bohlen was reported as saying to Avidar. The U.S. ambassador then explained that Israel could help the West in provoking Nasser into making a mistake. "Israel has the task," Bohlen explained, "of creating in the near future, during the conference, such tension along the Egyptian border that Nasser is compelled to reveal his aggressive intentions toward Israel." This was the pretext the West needed to crush him.

"My government is prepared for any kind of struggle with Egypt," Avidar reportedly replied. This information was reported quickly to Moscow by a KGB informant who claimed to have overheard the meeting. By the morning of August 14, Khrushchev, Bulganin, and Shepilov had their own copies to read.

Khrushchev was not in Moscow to read the KGB report on the Bohlen and Avidar conversation. He had left for the southern Ukraine on August 13 to make a personal tour of the Donbass coal region. In 1956 the Donbass produced 30 percent of all Soviet coal but because of political instability in
Poland, a major source of the coal burned in the Soviet Union, it might now need to produce more. Polish reformers were calling for a revision of the exploitative Soviet-Polish economic relationship. Since the late 1940s the Soviets had forced the Poles to sell them coal at 10 percent of the world price. Coal was Poland’s chief export, and with most of it going to the Soviet Union in tribute, Poland could not acquire sufficient foreign currency through trade to cover its purchases of Western machinery and food. Khrushchev’s initiation of destalinization had opened the door to the Poles to renegotiate this vestige of the Stalinist era. Still, however sympathetic Khrushchev was to Polish aspirations, he also knew that the Soviet energy industry would have a hard time replacing Polish coal with its own.

While Khrushchev was in the Ukraine, the remaining members of the Presidium reviewed the Soviet agenda for the London Conference. Once again all the leaders agreed that they did not like the draft statements prepared by the Foreign Ministry. Malenkov stressed that there was still too much in the drafts that spoke of Egypt’s needs and not enough that explained the Soviet interest in a peaceful settlement of the matter. Malenkov wanted to go a step further, and he returned to an idea he had mentioned at the August session. They could ask Nasser to promise to use some of the Suez Canal Company’s reserves to maintain the canal, instead of diverting them all for the Aswan Dam. There had been no encouragement from his colleagues in the earlier session, and Malenkov had no more success this time.

Lacking any strong consensus on how to guide the parties in London to a peaceful settlement, the Kremlin decided for the present time that Shepilov would not carry any formal proposals with him to submit to the conference. Instead the leadership instructed him to give statements that stressed both Egypt’s right to nationalize the Suez Canal and Moscow’s expectation that the Egyptians would be willing to take some kind of formalized international advice on the administration of the canal. Hidden within the approved language was the suggestion of a compromise, international supervision without international control over the canal. Shepilov was authorized to cooperate with the Western powers, especially the United States, if this would avert a war in the Egyptian desert.

As the Soviets prepared for the London Conference, the White House was unsure whether it should take a leadership role in settling the dispute between its Western European allies and Egypt. Subtle differences were appearing between Eisenhower’s and Dulles’s positions; though both wished to avoid a war over the canal, they disagreed on the best long-term solution to the troubles in the Middle East. Dulles was increasingly convinced that Nasser had to be removed from office, and he saw forcing the Egyptian leader to accept international control of the canal as the first step to making that happen.

Eisenhower, however, was uncomfortable with the hard-line view of the French and the British on international control. He was not prepared to give up on the policy of leaving Nasser a bridge to come back to the West. Better than almost any of his advisers, Eisenhower was able to put himself in the shoes of the leader he confronted. He had his own canal in Panama, and he understood why Nasser had no interest in allowing others to control Suez. As a result, Eisenhower was inclined to accept international supervision of the canal once Nasser rejected international control.

At the last meeting in the White House before the secretary of state left for London, the president expressed his doubts about Dulles’s strategy. An all-or-nothing approach bent on achieving international control of the canal would not stabilize the region because Nasser would never accept this kind of international regime. Egypt, after all, had the right to own the canal, and ownership implied a management right.

Despite these concerns, Eisenhower did not rein in Dulles. He had a lot on his mind that August. The Republican National Convention in San Francisco was only a couple of weeks away. Rumors abounded that he was considering replacing Richard Nixon as his running mate. Although Eisenhower wasn’t really considering this, it remained a distraction. Perhaps bad health is the best explanation for the president’s passive response. Eisenhower was still recovering from a recent attack of ileitis, a painful intestinal disorder, and had suffered a major heart attack the year before, and his energy level was not what it should have been.

Dimitri Shepilov was a refreshing departure from his taciturn and stiff predecessor, Vyacheslav Molotov. This Soviet foreign minister smiled frequently and seemed comfortable with himself. On August 15 Shepilov left Moscow for London. “He appears more like an athlete than a politician,” the Reuters news agency observed after he arrived. His clothes were sporty, and unlike the other delegates to the conference, he didn’t bother to wear a fedora or a bowler. He did, however, constantly comb his thick black hair, which occasionally fell onto his face.

The London Conference opened at historic Lancaster House the next day. Beautifully appointed, said to be even grander than Buckingham Palace, this
former residence of the duke of York was in picturesque Pall Mall, next to the queen mother’s official residence. Shepilov’s behavior quickly indicated to the British and the other Western allies that more than better grooming set him apart from Molotov. After arriving in London, Shepilov gave a statement to the press in a transit lounge at the airport. Short and sweet, it laid out the principles upon which Moscow sought a peaceful settlement. “In our times international disputes can be settled only through negotiations by the countries concerned being guided by the principles of justice and a spirit of the times.” That “spirit” Shepilov defined as “strict observance of... full equality between States.” In other words, the USSR would not accept any proposed solution that undermined Egyptian sovereignty.

Shepilov’s actions in the first few days telegraphed that he would define success in London in two ways. First, he wished to build international pressure to restrain the British and French from taking military action in the Mediterranean. This was the consideration that had prompted Soviet participation in London, and it had to be Shepilov’s sine qua non. The other sign of success would be more difficult to pin down. The conference allowed the Soviet Union to demonstrate itself as the protector of young nationalist movements worldwide. There could be no better way to show Soviet commitment to these fragile new states than to be supportive of acts of self-determination.

Shepilov was also breaking the Soviet mold in ways not always appreciated in Moscow. He rewrote the draft statements telegraphed to him from his deputy, Vasily Kuznetsov. Where Kuznetsov had written “we,” Shepilov wrote “I.” What Moscow found annoying, the Western foreign ministers found dazzling. Not only was Shepilov’s manner different, but his words seemed to imply more flexibility in the Soviet position than they had ever heard before. The British foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, told Secretary Dulles that Shepilov had privately agreed that “control of [the] canal could not be placed under one man such as Nasser.”

Beyond the idiosyncrasies, Shepilov was faithfully following Khrushchev’s line not to give the Western powers any excuse to break up the conference and use Soviet actions as a pretext for an attack on Egypt. A few hours after meeting with Lloyd, Shepilov displayed the same earnest desire to find common ground with Dulles. “I do not intend to argue the correctness or incorrectness of Egypt’s action or those [of the] U.K. and France. . . . [The] important thing was to recognize that such situation exists.” The Soviet foreign minister praised Washington for sharing Moscow’s desire to decrease tension and find a peaceful settlement.

Shepilov hinted that the Soviet Union had sources that suggested a rift between the American and Western European positions. Assuring Dulles that his goal in mentioning the disagreements among the Atlantic partners was “not to drive a wedge” between the United States and its allies, Shepilov added that “if this opinion is true, the U.S. and USSR together might find way out of this crisis.” The Soviet foreign minister said that he had heard that the United States was already distributing a draft proposal for internationalizing the Egyptian Suez Canal Company, which administered the canal. Rather than exclude that idea entirely, Shepilov, in the spirit of seeking accommodation, said that “it seemed to him very strict and might have a bad reception in certain areas of the world.” Although careful not to encourage Shepilov too much, Dulles said that he shared the Soviet view that the challenge was to find a settlement that reconciled the rights of Egypt as a sovereign country and the interests of countries that had a vital stake in freedom of navigation through the canal. But he refused to budge from the goal of international control of the canal. “[T]here can be no universal confidence in Egypt’s ability alone,” he told his Soviet counterpart, “to administer [the] Canal operation.”

At a meeting later with the British and the French, Dulles assured them that the United States remained committed to using the conference to undermine Nasser. Dulles expected nothing from the formal sessions to come. London, Paris, and Washington had already decided what the conference would conclude. The task at hand was to lobby for a healthy majority among the twenty-two countries represented at the conference. Dulles was eager to ensure that not all of the developing world opposed the U.S.-British-French proposal. “[B]efore it is over,” he cabled Eisenhower, “there will be some smoke-filled rooms like Chicago and San Francisco.”

The Soviets, however, did not follow the script. The day after the formal start of the conference Shepilov met privately with Dulles to float a compromise proposal. Instead of forcing Egypt to turn the operation of the canal over to an international board, Shepilov suggested the formula of “Egyptian operation with the participation of other countries.” The Soviet foreign minister understood that this was a vague proposal, but he wanted Dulles to consider alternatives to the U.S.-British-French position. The Soviet negotiator agreed with the Americans that Egypt had shown political immaturity in the past. Moscow wanted Washington to know that it expected Egypt to permit Israel to use the canal. Shepilov suggested that the language of the 1888 convention be tightened to ensure access to the canal for all states. The Soviet position, however, was that Egypt had to be excused its past mistakes and treated as a sovereign country that would adhere to these new treaty requirements.
Dulles made special mention of the Soviet proposal in a highly secret cable to Eisenhower. But the secretary of state was not interested in working with the Soviets to achieve an acceptable compromise. He believed that accepting Shepilov's proposal would help the Soviet cause with the Arabs and result in "some downgrading of the British and the French." He told the president, "I doubt whether Soviet agreement is worth having at that price." Knowing that Eisenhower was more interested in diplomacy at that moment than he, Dulles added, "I shall do everything possible short of disloyalty to the British and the French to get Soviet agreement."

Eisenhower remained aloof from the proceedings in London. It appears he did not read the full description of what Shepilov actually proposed. This was unfortunate because the Soviet representative was substantially making the same case for modified international participation that Eisenhower himself was making to Dulles. On August 18 and 19 the president sent notes to Dulles to discourage him from signing on to a position that would be impossible for Nasser to swallow. He added that he hoped "the results of the conference [would] not be wrecked on the rigidity of the positions of the two sides on this particular point." Although he made no mention of the Soviet proposal, Eisenhower was saying that he liked the idea of establishing an international board to provide advice to Nasser, while leaving the management of the canal to the Egyptian company.

Eisenhower did not insist that these ideas be reflected in the U.S. position at the conference. Dulles persuaded him that Nasser might accept internationalization of the canal, and even if Nasser rejected this first effort at a diplomatic settlement, it was more important for the United States to stand by its Western allies.

With the American position frozen by Dulles, Shepilov curiously did not formally propose the compromise he had privately suggested to the secretary of state. A passivity had also fallen over the Kremlin. Although it was watching the proceedings carefully, Khrushchev was out of the city, and the Presidium did not feel the need to meet to discuss any new instructions for Shepilov.

Fortunately for Moscow, the Indian delegation decided on its own before the end of the conference to propose something that echoed Shepilov's and Eisenhower's ideas about international supervision without control. The proposal was a godsend to Moscow, though there is no evidence that it was behind the proposal. Here a third world country was making the points the Kremlin had intended to make. The canal would remain Egyptian and under Egyptian control.

The Indian proposal made no difference to the outcome of the conference, which had been preordained by the British, the French, and the Americans before any of the other delegates arrived. India lacked the clout of the Western allies to cause any major defections from the supporters of the internationalizing position. On August 23 the chairman of the conference, British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd, called for a vote on the five-power (Pakistan and Iran signed on with the three-power proposal once some cosmetic changes had been made) and Indian proposals. The five-power proposal received eighteen votes. The Soviet Union, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Indonesia joined India in voting for New Delhi's proposal. Great Britain, France, and Dulles got what they wanted. Although the canal would still "belong" to Egypt, the Egyptian government would be expected to delegate to an international board the right to manage it, in return for which Cairo would receive a percentage of the revenues from the tolls. It was decided that a delegation headed by Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies would present the conference's proposal to Nasser in Cairo in early September.

Khrushchev was not satisfied with the outcome of the London Conference. Just home from his trip to the Donbass and another to Siberia, the Soviet leader had little energy of his own to devote to the Suez problem. But he was aware of the 18–4 vote in London and the fact that the majority intended to impose the internationalization of the canal on Nasser. It annoyed Khrushchev that the West was allowing its concerns over the efficient management of the canal, which the Soviets shared, to derail any possibility of achieving a peaceful settlement.

He decided to intervene personally. At a dinner reception at the Romanian Embassy, honoring the twelfth anniversary of the entry of the Soviet Army into Bucharest, he took the French and British ambassadors aside to lecture them on the errors of the majority view in London. He stressed that a consultative board was the solution to the problem of reconciling international concerns over the management of the canal with Egypt's sovereign rights. He charged the British above all with pushing for an outcome at the conference that they knew in advance Nasser would reject. Alluding to intelligence he was receiving that pointed to the possibility of an Anglo-French attack following Nasser's rejection of these terms, Khrushchev warned the Western ambassadors. "The Arabs will not stand alone," he vowed, if war broke out.

The only credible military threat that Khrushchev felt he could make was to raise the possibility that the Soviet Union might send "volunteers" to
defend Egypt. In 1950 a million Chinese "volunteers" had invaded Alliedoccupied North Korea to rid the peninsula of Western influence. Khrushchev said to the foreign ambassadors that if he had a son of military age who could volunteer, "I would tell him to go ahead. 'You have my approval.'"84

Khrushchev had new instructions sent to London to toughen the rhetoric that Shepilov was to use at his closing press conference the next day. "Before your departure," he cabled in a message also signed by the chairman of the Council of Ministers, Nikolai Bulganin, "hit these imperialists on the snout!"85 The period of Soviet conciliation on Suez was over. The Western powers, including the United States, it appeared, had never intended to seek a peaceful settlement.

The next day, in a room filled to overflowing, Shepilov gave a tough speech in front of 175 journalists. He said that his view of Secretary Dulles had changed for the worse. The five-power plan, which he called the Dulles Plan, involved "a flagrant violation of Egypt's sovereign rights" that flowed from "an unacceptable colonialist position."86 The language was strong but did not come close to expressing Khrushchev's irritation at how the conference had gone.

Khrushchev was still angry when Shepilov reached Moscow. "I had just reached my apartment and put down my valise," Shepilov later recalled, "when I called [Khrushchev]." The Soviet chief told him: "Get over here." When Shepilov reached the Kremlin and they were together, Khrushchev asked, "Now listen, why didn't you follow the instruction that I sent you with Bulganin?" Shepilov replied: "We had already won the battle, and so why ruin relations with them [France, Great Britain, and the United States]?" His ire rising, Khrushchev said, "So now you want to direct foreign policy.,,87

The hectoring of Shepilov continued at a formal meeting of the Presidium a little while later. One after another the members lambasted him for not having been tough enough at the closing press conference. "This voluntarism was wrong and dangerous," stated Khrushchev.88 "Nothing is to be interpreted; once a directive is given, you should know how to act," Presidium member Mikhail Pervukhin added. Georgi Malenkov even attacked Shepilov for having been too chummy with Dulles at one of their meetings.

This was displaced anger mixed with jealousy. Shepilov had made a good impression in the West and needed to be put in his place. But the main catalyst was the diplomatic defeat that Moscow had suffered at the London Conference. The West had ignored its wishes, and it had only the votes of three countries along with its own to show for its efforts.

The conference was not a fiasco for Moscow. It did represent the first time that the USSR was recognized as a player in the Middle East, and its participation did increase Soviet influence with the Egyptians. For the first time since the dispute had started, Nasser turned to Moscow for foreign policy advice. At the end of August the Egyptian leader called the Soviet ambassador in for a private chat. Knowing that the delegation led by Menzies was due to arrive in Cairo in less than two weeks, Nasser asked for "the opinion and advice of D. T. Shepilov in connection with further steps and tactics." He added, "All Soviet advice would be received positively."89

At a Presidium meeting two days later Khrushchev and his colleagues approved a list of policy recommendations for Egypt.90 Moscow shared Cairo's conviction that despite Western threats, the London Conference proposals had to be rejected. To undermine the Western argument that Nasser had snatched the canal in the hopes of doing damage to other countries, the Soviets suggested instead that he announce the basic principles upon which the canal would be administered. They also suggested the principles. The first was that the Egyptian Suez Canal Company "not be assigned any kind of political function"; the second, that it be "independent in its operational activity of any [governmental] economic organ"; and the third, that it have a "juridical form subject to Egyptian law and operating on the basis of a special administration, in view of its unitary independent budget." They added that Egypt should declare that the Suez Canal Company would guarantee free passage through the canal "on the basis of complete equality for the ships of all flags without any kind of discrimination." In other words, as the price for gaining international acceptance of the nationalization, Egypt would have to accept Israel's right to use the canal.91

Moscow continued to have concerns about the proper functioning of the canal under the Egyptians. It suggested that the Egyptian company commit itself to hiring foreign specialists: engineers, pilots, and other technical personnel. Egypt should also say that it endorsed the formation of an international consultative commission on the canal that would allow for international cooperation on technical assistance and on the use of tariffs and their collection before ships exited the canal. Although Moscow wanted the canal company to be separate from this international consultative commission, it suggested that Nasser think hard about how Egypt and the company would link themselves to the United Nations. Moscow thought that in addition to announcing its willingness to proceed along these lines, Egypt should organize a conference in Cairo of countries that used the canal "to discuss the draft of a new convention that would guarantee freedom of pas-
sage through the Suez Canal and also the question of the form of international cooperation.\(^9\)

While the delegation headed by Menzies was negotiating with Nasser, the Kremlin did not want the West to have any pretext for a military intervention. Since the middle of the month Moscow had been receiving reports of British and French efforts to undermine the operation of the canal. The British and French governments had asked their citizens working for the canal company as ship pilots to leave their jobs. According to Soviet estimates, of the 280 men who worked as pilots guiding ships through the canal, only 50 were Egyptian. The French, for example, offered their citizens who abandoned the canal thirty-six months' severance pay as well as a pension adjusted to the time worked for the canal company. As a way of helping Cairo keep the canal open and thereby remove any Anglo-French arguments for war, the Kremlin decided on August 30 to send thirty experienced ships' pilots to help fill the holes in the canal administration. It also suggested to Nasser that he formally ask for volunteers from the bloc countries of Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia, as well as from India, Greece, and Finland.\(^9\)

As it tried to eliminate any pretexts for a Western attack, Moscow provided some military support to the Egyptians. In the first week of September, as Nasser was meeting with the Menzies delegation, the Soviets sent shiploads of weapons to the Egyptian Army. Meanwhile, by means of the KGB, Moscow provided military handbooks and training films and presumably some military advisers to show Egyptian officers how to use this material.\(^9\)

**American actions** at the London Conference had been disappointing to Khrushchev. By signing on to the declaration of eighteen, the United States effectively endorsed a diplomatic plan that was guaranteed to produce an Egyptian refusal. If Washington was not prepared to stop its allies, then the Kremlin needed to know how seriously to take the anger in Western Europe, especially the determination of Great Britain to harm Nasser.

Khrushchev had some reason to hope that Britain lacked the resolve to participate in any Western conspiracy against Nasser. Since 1951 two former members of the British establishment, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, had lived in Moscow. Until they fled their homeland in May 1951, Burgess and Maclean had operated as Soviet intelligence moles in, among other places, the Foreign Office. Now working under the aliases D. M. Elliot and Mr. Frazer, the two former spies served as high-level advisers to the Soviet Foreign Ministry on British politics and politicians. Khrushchev and the Presidium regularly received reports on the meetings that the two most famous Britons in Moscow were having with old friends and British journalists who came to Moscow to see them.\(^9\)

In mid-August Tom Driberg, the deputy leader of the British Labour Party and a journalist, had come to Moscow to see Burgess. Despite the rumblings in the British press that London might strike at Nasser, Driberg had told Burgess that Eden was too weak to attempt to impose his will on Egypt by force: "It was all bluff."\(^9\) Reminding Burgess that "British journalists were usually a good barometer of official decision-making," Driberg assured him that "Fleet Street does not expect a war in the Middle East now." Khrushchev was so taken by this account of the meeting that he asked to see Driberg himself.\(^9\) The British political activist repeated the same story to the Soviet leader at their meeting on August 30.\(^9\) It seemed that despite the hue and cry following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, at least, Britain, would do nothing.

Events in September deepened the belief in Moscow that a Midast crisis might be averted. As expected, Nasser refused to accept the proposals carried by the Menzies delegation. However, the day after it left Cairo Nasser called for a new international conference, assuring the world that Egypt was fully prepared to negotiate but not on the terms suggested by the eighteen-country bloc at the London Conference. Meanwhile Foster Dulles suggested a Suez users' association, consisting of all the countries that used the canal, to negotiate with Egypt. France and Great Britain formally endorsed Dulles's plan and called for a second conference in London to approve the Suez users' association. From Moscow's perspective what happened next suggested that the British push for war was losing steam. Eden's opponents in the House of Commons started a major public debate on the entire Suez policy, criticizing him for being too belligerent. On September 22 the prime minister surprised the world by calling for the UN Security Council to take up discussion of the Suez problem. The Soviets and the Egyptians had been advocating for this since July, and now, seemingly under political pressure, the British also recommended it. A date was set for talks to begin on October 5.

These hopeful developments in London provoked a policy review in Moscow. Both the Foreign Ministry and the Soviet intelligence community were asked to update their assessments of where the crisis might be going.

The Soviet intelligence community responded with a series of very alarming reports. On September 20 the KGB distributed a report on the measures that France and the British would take in the event of an outbreak of hostilities with Egypt.\(^9\) A few days later the KGB learned of a Western plot to assassinate Nasser that the Kremlin took so seriously that two KGB officers were
The Soviet Foreign Ministry understood that Eden was committed to decisive action but left open the possibility that the opposition was becoming too strong. Evidence for this was that it had been three months since British warships left port headed for the Mediterranean and no attack had followed. It appeared likely that London would not act without some kind of UN sanction.

A similar Soviet study of the French political leadership, however, was much less sanguine. There was still remarkable unity in Paris behind a policy of dealing harshly with Nasser. Soviet analysis identified three reasons for the determination of the French: the anger of French stakeholders from across the party spectrum who had lost their investments when the canal company was nationalized; the role of Jews in French public life, in all parties but especially in the ruling Socialist Party; and a sense that if Nasser prevailed in the Suez, then little Nassers would be encouraged in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Using the Hitler analogy, the French political elite believed in a parallel between the nationalization of Suez and the Nazi remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936. Nasser had to be stopped here before the situation got worse.

The Kremlin reached no conclusions over what the French and especially the British intended to achieve at the Security Council discussions that started on October 5. Foreign Minister Shepilov, who headed the Soviet delegation, warned at the UN that the French and British might simply be looking for a pretext for war. He suggested that the Europeans were already prepared to tell their people: “You have urged us to appeal to the UN. We have done so, but, as you see, it is powerless. It can do nothing. Other steps must be taken. Egypt is guilty. Crucify it!”

Nasser had no doubt of London’s and Paris’s sinister intentions in New York. Anticipating a breakdown in the talks, he spent the first days of October trying to hedge his bets with both Moscow and Washington so that at least one of them would be prepared to come to Egypt’s defense. On October 7 Nasser asked Khrushchev via the KGB chief in Cairo whether “in the event of an attack on Egypt, the Egyptian government could count on the Soviets dispatching volunteers and submarines.” Meanwhile he sent two of his key aides, Ali Sabri and Mohamed Heikal, to meet with Kermit Roosevelt of the CIA, who was considered a secure back channel to the Eisenhower administration.

Sabri and Heikal told the CIA that Nasser wanted U.S. help to ward off both British military intervention and further Soviet penetration of his country. Cairo was skeptical of British diplomacy, assuming that London’s maneuvering in the Security Council was designed to provide a pretext for war. Eden’s Conservatives wanted to be able to show the Labour Party that they had done all they could to seek a diplomatic settlement. Meanwhile Cairo

flown to Cairo to assist Nasser’s security detail. The KGB’s source is not known, but the warning was grounded in fact. Eden had made it known to his top advisers—and perhaps indirectly to Soviet intelligence—that he supported an assassination attempt if it could rid him of his Nasser problem. “I want Nasser murdered, don’t you understand?” Eden had told a senior Foreign Office official on an open telephone line. In early October representatives of the Secret Intelligence Service, Britain’s external espionage organization, flew to Washington to confer with the CIA on how the Americans could assist them in overthrowing Nasser. The CIA, however, turned down any participation in an assassination attempt.

Meanwhile the Soviet military intelligence service, the GRU, reported on a significant Western military buildup in the eastern Mediterranean. The Soviet military, which did not discount the possibility that the United States might ultimately assist an Anglo-French assault on Egypt, included the powerful U.S. Sixth Fleet in its tally of Western strength. But the most significant military deployments observed in the region since August were by the British and the French. Since July 26 the British had increased the number of their troops in the area from twenty-seven thousand to forty-five thousand and the French, who had not had any soldiers there before, now had six thousand. There were three British aircraft carriers patrolling the area, whereas there had been only one in that part of the Mediterranean before. Equally noteworthy was the major increase in Britain’s local airlift and sealift capabilities. The GRU detected eight more British transport planes and more than a tripling of British transport ships. Much of this military capability had been put on display in a major exercise called Septex 2 held on September 13 and 14 to train for an invasion from sea and air. In addition, the Soviets noted that as part of a strategy to wear down the Egyptians psychologically, the British had increased the air traffic of their bombers between bases in Great Britain and the island of Malta.

Khrushchev’s diplomatic specialists were less alarmist about the situation than were the Soviet intelligence services. The political assessments of the Soviet Foreign Ministry presented a mixed picture of likely scenarios. A crisp analysis of the British political scene in late September informed the Kremlin that Eden led an increasingly divided government in the crisis. The Soviet paper noted that opponents to a military action included Foreign Secretary Lloyd and Eden’s political rival, Rab Butler. In Parliament the Tories faced a Labour Party that was solidly opposed to military action, though the party was itself split over whether or not the Suez Canal should be internationalized. The Soviet Foreign Ministry understood that Eden was committed to decisive
argued that Moscow was hungry to play the role of Egypt's savior. Nasser wanted the Americans to advise their British friends not to introduce a hostile resolution in the Security Council. The effect would be a Soviet veto, which would only increase Egypt's debt to Soviet diplomacy. Sabri explained that economic pressures had already forced Nasser much closer to the Soviet Union than he had hoped to be. "He is no longer able," the Egyptian representative explained, "to adhere to his policy of limiting Egyptian trade with the communists to 30% of her trade in any one commodity."

If the Eisenhower administration found that it could not play a helpful role in the corridors at the UN, the Egyptians hoped that at the very least Washington would be willing to share CIA estimates of British intentions in the Middle East. For all his anxiety over what Eden might do next, Nasser had no firm information on which to predict the future course of the crisis. He assumed, wrongly, as it turned out, that the United States had to have a better sense than he did of what their British ally was up to.108

Events at the United Nations over the next few days led both superpowers to believe that they could safely ignore Nasser's concerns.109 By October 12 the foreign ministers of Egypt, France, and Great Britain had reached a tentative agreement on six principles that would govern Egypt's management of the canal. Perhaps because he had not received any reassurance from Moscow or Washington, Nasser had instructed his foreign minister, Mohammed Fawzi, to agree to the French and British demand that Egypt "insulate" the canal from politics. This was exactly the undertaking that Moscow had been urging on the Egyptian government since August. Nasser refused to let Fawzi say whether Israel would again be denied the use of the canal. But Egypt's acceptance of the general policy of letting the use of the canal be handled apolitically satisfied the French and British negotiators. Egypt also agreed to recognize a users' association so long as disagreements between it and the canal management could be handled by arbitration. Although Egypt intended to collect the tolls itself, Fawzi promised that Cairo would negotiate an agreement that set aside a portion for canal improvements. The Egyptians proved so flexible that at one point Shepilov, who had been kept outside the Egyptian-French-British discussions, cabled home his concerns that Cairo might be making too many concessions out of fear of a military attack.110

With agreement reached at the United Nations on the six principles, both Washington and Moscow began to assume that war in the Middle East was much less likely. On October 12, in a televised meeting with a group of ordinary Americans organized by the Eisenhower/Nixon campaign, Eisenhower expressed his optimism that war could be averted over Egypt: "The progress