finalizing the understandings reached at Vladivostok and then by progressing forward. “We will never embark on the road of aggression, will never raise the sword against other nations.” This was why détente remained the policy of the Soviet government. “Détent means first of all the overcoming of the cold war and the transition to normal, stable relations among states. Déten means willingness to resolve differences and disputes not by force. Déten means a certain trust and ability to take into consideration each other’s legitimate interests.”

Brezhnev’s words augured well for a new beginning with a new American administration. But intentions cannot always be realized. International turbulence interceded. The North Vietnamese communists were consolidating their victory over the South and beginning to flaunt their power throughout Indochina. In the Middle East, two recent wars—in 1967 and 1973—had left the region in greater turmoil than before and threatened to suck in the great powers. Arab governments refused to recognize Israel’s right to exist within secure borders, and Israel would not relinquish territories it had conquered from Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Beyond the Middle East, the entire African continent seethed with unrest. After radical military officers seized power in Lisbon in 1974 and overthrew the authoritarian government that had ruled Portugal for more than forty years, they announced their intent to free Portugal’s possessions, thereby ending the era of European colonialism in the third world. The strife in Angola was one direct consequence of the resulting power vacuum, but turmoil spread well beyond the former Portuguese territories. In southern Africa, particularly in Rhodesia, black liberation movements struggled to gain power, and in South Africa, the African National Congress did not abandon hope that someday it would topple the racist apartheid regime. Elsewhere, in the Horn of Africa, a radical group of Marxist-Leninist military officers in Ethiopia, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, had toppled Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and was struggling to consolidate its regime. Ethiopia’s neighbor, Somalia, already ruled by a radical-talking leader, Siad Barre, glimpsed opportunities for territorial gain at Ethiopia’s expense. In all these places, racial injustice and the legacy of colonialism mixed with regional rivalries, tribal strife, and economic backwardness.

For Moscow, vigilance was imperative in the third world because imperialism and counterrevolution might revive and show their ugly faces. But where there was danger, there was also opportunity: if allowed to express their own volition, the developing nations of the world would emulate the Soviet Union, “which opened the road to a new life for mankind.” The “countries of victorious socialism and the forces of national liberation,” Kremlin leaders never stopped saying, “are natural and reliable allies in the anti-imperialist struggle.”

Officially, the Kremlin’s position could not have been more correct. “The Soviet Union does not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and peoples. It is an immutable principle of our Leninist foreign policy to respect the right of every people, every country, to choose its own way of development.” But whether the Soviet Union would resist temptation or prudently assess danger was uncertain. On such calculations, the future of détente hinged. For although the U.S.S.R., according to Brezhnev, “does not look for advantages, does not hunt for concessions, does not seek political domination, and is not after military bases,” it nevertheless acted according to its revolutionary conscience and communist convictions.

A New Face in Washington, an Old One in Moscow

Jimmy Carter was a new face on the American political scene. Raised in rural southwest Georgia on a farm during the Great Depression, he sought more opportunity and more scope for his talents than the land and community could provide. He attended the U.S. Naval Academy, became an engineer, helped to design the first U.S. nuclear submarines, and then, surprisingly, in 1953, quit the navy and returned to the farm on which he grew up, when his father died of cancer. Jimmy’s parents were not wealthy, but they lived in comfort compared with the black laborers and sharecroppers who worked their land and with whose children Jimmy had played, fished, and hunted as a child. Like his father, Jimmy aimed to succeed in farming, yet he cared deeply about the well-being of the larger community. Also like his father, he participated on local boards of education and then entered politics. He served in the Georgia Senate in the early 1960s, ran for and lost the governorship in 1966, and then ran again in 1970, becoming chief executive of one of the poorest states in the union. As Carter matured, he recognized the deep inequities and racial injustices that made a mockery of the American dream for African Americans. They deserved their rights; poor people, whether
Jimmy Carter was characterized by paradox. He was modest yet self-confident, humble yet ambitious. He was a man of deep faith, a born-again Christian, yet secular and humane in his outlook. He prayed several times a day but privately and unobtrusively. He had gone to the Naval Academy, but he eschewed militarism and was averse to the nation's use of force. He was affable and radiated cheerfulness, yet he craved solitude and was often cold in his personal relations with people. He read several books a week yet sought intense exercise and liked competitive sports. He appreciated contrasting ideas, but once he made up his mind he was not inclined to reexamine. If there was one political attribute that accounted for his success, he would later reflect, it was his "tenacity. Once I get on something, I'm awfully hard to change."86

Jimmy Carter had no real background in foreign-policy matters, and he frequently declared that the country's success in foreign policy depended on getting its domestic house in order. Yet from day one his advisers knew that he intended to be the decision maker in foreign-policy matters, leaving domestic issues to cabinet officials, whom he encouraged to run their own departments. His managerial style was to set a broad direction for his top executives and let them organize, coordinate, and execute.88 He preferred to master a few priority issues. And master them he did.

Jimmy Carter was disciplined, curious, industrious, and, yes, tenacious. "I'm an engineer at heart and I like to understand the details of things," he subsequently recalled.89 But immersion in detail did not divert him from the big picture. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Columbia University professor of Soviet history and politics who became Carter's national security adviser, commented: "His memory was phenomenal, his reading voracious, and his thirst for more knowledge unquenchable."90 Cyrus Vance, a lawyer who was Carter's choice for secretary of state, described his new boss in much the same way, adding that the incoming president always preferred "bold, comprehensive" approaches rather than "modest, incremental building on past agreements."91

Carter's election had been a matter of circumstance. After Watergate, Vietnam, and the CIA scandals, he represented something new in American politics, something that Americans appreciated as never before. He was an outsider from national politics, untainted by the corruption, lies, and failures of his predecessors, whether Democrats or Republicans. He prided himself on his integrity and competence. "Why not the best?" he asked the American people. Why not choose a person who represented their deepest values and reflected their honesty and decency; who believed, as they did, in the importance of an efficiently administered and open government that nurtured opportunity for everyone but remained fiscally responsible and circumscribed in its authority; who was both realistic and idealistic? For Carter, "the demonstration of American idealism was a practical and realistic approach to foreign affairs, and moral principles were the best foundation for the exertion of American power and influence."92

Before taking office, Carter asked Vance and Brzezinski to submit memoranda outlining the new administration's goals and priorities, and the president-elect discussed these aims with each in great depth. "First," wrote Brzezinski, "I felt it important to increase America's ideological impact on the world and to infuse greater historical optimism into our outlook." He wanted "to restore America's political appeal to the Third World," and to "improve America's strategic position . . . in relationship to the Soviet Union." Brzezinski worried that the Soviet Union's growing military capabilities might tempt the Kremlin "to exploit Third World turbulence or to impose its will in some political contest with the United States."93

Vance talked to Carter about these issues, too. He hoped to reduce tensions with the Soviet Union, "while vigorously defending our global interests and maintaining an unquestioned military balance." He wanted to sustain détente, but insisted that it be "reciprocal." He also advised Carter that we "must not become so preoccupied with U.S.-Soviet and East-West relations" that we fail to address the more pressing problems besetting the third world.94

Vance and Brzezinski were men of different backgrounds, sensibilities, and inclinations. Brzezinski had a deep sense of his Polish identity and, like many Poles, harbored a deep distrust of Soviet Russia. Widely read and widely published, he was ambitious and intelligent. Eager to gain as much influence as he could, he wanted easy access to the president and maximum control over the coordinating mechanisms of the National Security Council, which he quickly reorganized into two subcommittees, the Policy Review
Committee and the Special Coordination Committee. “Coordination is predominance,” he wrote in his memoir.  

Vance was a quiet, methodical, thoughtful lawyer who had had considerable experience serving in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. During the presidential campaign, when Vance was an adviser, Carter came to like, admire, and trust him. Vance did not seek fame or glory. He was quiet and discreet, an able negotiator, a careful tactician. Sensitive to the new crosscurrents in the international political economy and the seething unrest in the third world, he was as eager as the new president to move beyond the traditional shibboleths of the Cold War.  

Although Vance and Brzezinski were to clash in the future, the friction between them initially was minimal. Carter was not worried about their differences. He felt comfortable with them and with his extraordinarily able and accomplished secretary of defense, Harold Brown, and his affable and knowledgeable vice president, Walter Mondale. In fact, the president’s favorite time of the week was Friday mornings, when he would discuss the most pressing issues with his foreign-policy team. He did not fear conflicting views. He was self-confident and liked to listen to disparate advice, sift through the facts, and come to his own decisions. Hamilton Jordan, Carter’s longtime and most trusted political confidante and administrative assistant, neatly summed up the president’s attitude: “Zbig would be the thinker, Cy would be the doer, and Jimmy Carter would be the decider.”  

Carter intended to make human rights a central, if not the central, theme of his foreign policy. In his inaugural address, a speech he drafted himself, Carter outlined a new direction for the United States. Rather than Kissinger’s affinity for balances of power, or Kennedy’s invocation of strength, or Truman’s quest for containment, Carter aimed to restore faith in an “old dream—the dream of human liberty.” This dream “endures.” As the world experienced rapid change, peoples everywhere yearned for “their place in the sun.” They demanded their basic human rights. “The passion for freedom is on the rise . . . Because we are free, we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere.”  

These words reflected his deepest convictions. “I know how easy it is to overlook the persecution of others,” he wrote, alluding to the segregated society in which he had been raised and which he had taken for granted until adulthood. But injustice no longer could be tolerated. Human rights constituted “the new reality of our time,” he believed, “the new historical inevitability of our time.”  

Carter was profoundly aware that the international system was fragmenting and disorder was spreading. U.S. allies, especially West Germany, France, and Japan, were growing in strength and often unhappy with American decisions. They were incensed by American monetary policy during the Nixon years, when the United States unilaterally suspended the convertibility of the dollar and forced them to deal with the consequences of U.S. balance-of-payment deficits. Carter now needed those allies’ assistance and collaboration, especially given the new challenges posed by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the oil cartel that included Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and Venezuela. After the defeat of Egypt and Syria in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, OPEC had quadrupled petroleum prices and thrown the capitalist West into disarray. Inflation soared, economic growth rates dropped, and unemployment in Western Europe, Japan, and the United States reached its highest levels since 1945.  

The new power of the OPEC nations reflected the aspirations of the southern part of the globe. Although most governments in Asia, Africa, the
Middle East, and Latin America did not have OPEC’s leverage, their clamor for national autonomy, unrestricted sovereignty, higher raw material prices, and a fairer distribution of wealth created a new discourse and a new agenda for the capitalist West. The demands of these nations intensified as the last colonial empire, that of the Portuguese, disintegrated, and as national liberation movements competed for power throughout southern Africa. Their rhetoric was laced with appeals for justice, remonstrations against racism, and threats of retribution. They distrusted the laws of the free marketplace. They hoped that purposeful state action could overcome the legacy of imperialism and the iron laws of capitalism. And they had champions in Moscow and supporters in Beijing, where the attentiveness of the leaders of the two great communist states was advanced by their own competition with each other.\(^{101}\)

“Can Capitalism Survive?” was the cover story in *Time* magazine about a year before Carter was elected. Everywhere in the Western world, *Time* pointed out,

There is a gnawing fear that capitalism has no way to cure inflation except deep recession, and that any concerted attempt to lift an economy rapidly out of recession will only fan inflation. . . . Inflationary recession is only the most imminent danger; there are longer-range subtler perils, too. Within many a capitalist country, the free market is being steadily hemmed in by the power of omnipresent government regulators, mass unions, and giant corporations.

Seven Nobel Prize winners signed a declaration condemning corporate greed and called for an “intensive search for alternatives to the prevailing Western economy.” This was expressive of the general mood in the United States as prosperity waned, prices soared, and real wages ended their steep postwar incline.\(^ {102}\)

Not since 1947 had American officials worried so much about turmoil in Western Europe. “The Western Allies have been in a protracted period of political stagnation and economic decline,” Brzezinski warned the president on 11 March 1977. Communist parties, increasingly critical of Moscow’s policies, were gaining strength. European elites feared that their peoples were losing “faith in the liberal democratic political and economic system that has provided both prosperity and social stability.” “Every major government in Europe is a near political minority (FRG, France, Britain, Italy),” said Brzezinski, “and neither Japan nor Canada can be considered in good shape. This political weakness has been aggravated by economic stagnation. . . . Communist parties and those of the extreme right have growing public acceptance and legitimacy.”\(^ {103}\)

If Europe was shaky, conditions elsewhere were even more so. “Explosive forces of change in the developing world” had to be reckoned with, Vance felt. Africa “is a morass,” Brzezinski wrote Carter on 1 April 1977. The continent “is in the midst of social-political upheaval, with post-colonial structures collapsing.” Pro-Western and pro-Soviet regimes and factions were contesting for power. The situation was “grave,” portending a “rather dark future.” Looking forward ten or twenty years, “it is clear that the United States needs desperately to fashion a comprehensive and long-term North-South strategy.”\(^ {104}\)

“If it is a new world, but America should not fear it,” Carter said in a major speech at Notre Dame University after being in office a few months. “It is a new world, and we should help to shape it. It is a new world that calls for a new American foreign policy—a policy based on constant decency in its values and on optimism in its historical vision.”\(^ {105}\)

Carter’s advisers had to design a foreign policy that comported with the president’s commitment to a “moral base.” This was not a problem for Brzezinski. At a time “when the Soviet Union was saying that the scales of history were tipping in favor of socialism” and when the Kremlin was declaring that the “triumph of communism was only a decade away,” he knew that Carter’s commitment to human rights constituted a good geopolitical strategy and admirable idealism.\(^ {106}\) The president’s intentions were “coherent and consistent,” Brzezinski wrote Carter. Attentive to the “emerging consciousness of mankind,” Brzezinski said he would implement the president’s wishes:

1. We will seek to coordinate more closely with our principal allies in order to provide the foundations for a more stable international system;
2. We will engage in a North-South dialogue in order to deal with wider human needs;
3. We will
seek accommodation on the East-West front in order to avoid war and to widen trans-ideological cooperation. In addition, we will seek to halt the spread of arms, both conventional and nuclear.\textsuperscript{107}

Undaunted, Carter sought to address the many looming problems, but did not make his priorities clear. To shore up relations with allies and mend West-West relations, he sent Vice President Mondale to Western Europe and Japan. To set a new tone in North-South relations, he appointed Andrew Young, a black American and a former mayor of Atlanta, as ambassador to the United Nations and sent him on a mission to southern Africa. To reinvigorate Middle East diplomacy, he sent Vance to Tel Aviv and Cairo. And to resolve the long-festering and potentially explosive dispute with Panama, he appointed a special representative to renegotiate the canal treaty. We "needed to correct an injustice," Carter maintained. Panama's demand to regain sovereignty over the canal had "become a litmus test throughout the world, indicating how the United States, as a superpower, would treat a small and relatively defenseless nation."\textsuperscript{108}

Carter wrote his first letter to Chairman Brezhnev on 26 January 1977: "I want to confirm that my aim is to improve relations with the Soviet Union on the basis of reciprocity, mutual respect and advantage. I will pay close personal attention to this goal, as will Secretary Vance." He emphasized that he wanted to avoid a new arms race—"the elimination of all nuclear weapons is my firm goal"—and to move ahead on the SALT talks. He hoped to conclude a "properly verifiable agreement on the universal banning of all nuclear tests" and anticipated progress on the "balanced reduction of military forces in Central Europe." He also expressed a desire to improve economic ties, adding, "At the same time we can not be indifferent to the fate of freedom and individual human rights."

Toward the end of the letter, Carter explicated his general approach to bilateral relations, one that was not very different than Brezhnev's own:

We represent different social systems, and our countries differ from each other in their history and experience. A competition in ideas and ideas is inevitable between our societies. Yet this must not interfere with common efforts towards formation of a more peaceful, just, and humane world. We live in the world, which to a greater and greater extent demands collective answers to the main human questions, and I hope that our countries can cooperate more closely to promote the development, better diet and more substantive life for the less advantaged part of mankind.\textsuperscript{109}

Although Brezhnev answered in a businesslike manner, saying he was looking forward to Secretary Vance's visit, relations quickly took a turn for the worse.\textsuperscript{110} In a meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin and in a second message to Brezhnev, Carter said he was seeking much larger cuts in nuclear arsenals than had been envisioned at Vladivostok.\textsuperscript{111} On 5 February, moreover, he responded to a letter from Andrei Sakharov, the eminent Soviet physicist and renowned critic of the Soviet regime. The president tried to craft his response tactfully, but repeated his inaugural statement: "Because we are free, we cannot be indifferent to the fate of freedom everywhere."\textsuperscript{112}

Brezhnev and his colleagues were indignant. Washington seemed to be altering the terms of the deal negotiated with President Ford. Brezhnev did not oppose the idea of additional reductions, but he felt a sense of ownership about the Vladivostok understandings, for which he had taken a risk, overruling his military officials. He did not want to make changes now that might provoke dissent. He and Carter needed to proceed in an orderly manner. He regarded Carter's leap into the future as a "slap in the face,"\textsuperscript{113} The Soviet leaders were even more upset by Carter's letter to Sakharov. Andropov and Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov demanded that Brezhnev convene a special meeting of the Politburo. Carter was intervening in their internal affairs, precipitating a "drastic" change in direction and launching "unwise" policy. They understood their own situation in starkly different terms than did U.S. officials, seeing human rights conditions in the Soviet Union as improving, not deteriorating. The Western press, the Kremlin claimed, talked of tens of thousands of prisoners, "whereas in reality" very few people were serving sentences for crimes against the state. Some people—Sakharov, Yuri Orlov, Anatoly Shcharansky, and Aleksandr Ginzburg—were being persecuted, "but it was nothing like the massive repressions we used to have before," reflected reformist foreign-policy expert Georgi Shakhnazarov.\textsuperscript{114}
Andropov reported to the Politburo regularly on the treatment of dissidents. Between 1971 and 1974, the KGB warned about sixty-three thousand people to cease their activities—hiding pamphlets, circulating literature, conspiring with foreigners. Few of these warnings, however, led to imprisonment. In late 1975, there were about 830 political prisoners in the country, 261 incarcerated for disseminating anti-Soviet propaganda. In that same year, the year of the Helsinki Final Act, 76 people were tried in criminal courts; in 1976, there were 69 trials; and, in 1977, there were 48. In 1974, 178 dissidents were jailed; in 1975, there were 96; and in 1976, the number was 60. When the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group was formed in May 1976, members were under continuous KGB surveillance, but the organization was permitted to function (and was shut down only in 1982). Repressive as was the regime's behavior, “the constant monitoring,” concludes historian Svetlana Savranskaya, “was a very mild treatment by Soviet standards.”

After Helsinki, Brezhnev and his colleagues found themselves on the defensive, and they were angry. Since Khrushchev’s “thaw,” the regime had backtracked in its openness to cultural innovation and free political discourse. But the leaders were working on a new constitution and believed they were constructing a superior way of life, a society, in Brezhnev’s words, “which would enable every man to develop himself more fully and more usefully.” They could accept criticism but not efforts to undermine the basic premises of their way of life. In their view, the prominent dissidents whom Washington focused on were not friendly critics but “enemies of the regime.” The KGB arrested Orlov, Ginzburg, and Shcharansky in 1977, and gave them heavy sentences; other dissidents were forced into exile. But until the invasion of Afghanistan and the collapse of détente, the repression was restrained: between 1976 and 1980, 347 people were sentenced for political crimes.

The elderly men who ran the Kremlin, most of whom had lived through the revolution and all of whom had survived the Great Patriotic War, wanted their critics to understand the challenges they had faced and the magnitude of their achievements. The Kremlin instructed its ambassadors abroad to emphasize that for the first time in history human rights were being defended in the Soviet Union in deed and not just in word. Soviet people had free medical care and education, the right to vote, to work, and to be elected to key administrative positions. In contrast, Americans did not have employment rights or guarantees of security in their old age. Dobrynin was told to ask Vance how Carter would like it if the Soviet government decided to make détente contingent on the elimination of race discrimination or unemployment in the United States.

Soviet leaders acknowledged that more needed to be done in their society, but they demanded vigilance against any foes who tried to topple their noble imperfection enterprise. After all, they had transformed a backward land into a modern industrial state and now were grappling with the attendant challenges. Their task, they knew, was to make things better if only they could figure out how to do so. Among other things, they were working on a new constitution whose aim, said Brezhnev, was to deepen socialist democracy. As his colleagues collaborated on a response to Carter’s letter and prepared for the talks with Vance in Moscow, Brezhnev told trade union leaders that socialism and democracy were inseparable. “In building communism, we will develop democracy. One speaks, of course, about socialist democracy, that is a democracy that covers the political, social and economic spheres, a democracy that, above all, ensures social justice and social equality.”

Even while arresting leading dissidents, the Kremlin tried to defuse the human rights issue in Soviet-American relations. Brezhnev instructed Dobrynin to invite Henry Jackson—the hawkish, defense-minded Democratic senator who championed the rights of Jews and dissidents in the Soviet Union—to Moscow if Carter thought that would ease the president’s political difficulties. At the same time Andropov allegedly tried to make a deal with Sakharov that would restrict his activities but allow him to stay out of jail. The KGB director also told his subordinates to resolve specific human rights cases that the Americans deemed important. Brezhnev himself had given President Ford a year-by-year accounting of Jewish emigres, claiming that 98.4 percent of all requests to emigrate had been granted.

The men in the Kremlin thought they were genuinely trying to meet American concerns in order to promote détente and finalize a second strategic arms treaty. But they were incensed when Vance came to Moscow at the end of March 1977 and focused on making more significant cuts in nuclear arsenals than the Vladivostok framework had envisioned. “What you are bringing is a complete non-starter,” Dobrynin warned him. Brezhnev did not want new proposals. He wanted to complete the accord he had designed with President Ford. His colleagues told him that Washington was trying to
So his months passed, U.S. sentiment against the Soviet Union was growing, while welcome you to our nation at an early date so that you and I can pursue per­

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new position, wanting a bold departure from the past, and Brzezinski had that the ball was in the Soviet court and we should sit tight and wait for a turmoil in the international arena seemed to be increasing. Influential Dem­

viet violations of somebody's human rights! Unheard of! It was a personal af­

nev would bow to American demands. 129

high ground before the eyes of the world. "My view," wrote Brzezinski, "was to talk about human rights!" recalled Brezhnev's interpreter. "To talk about So­

yet Vance and his subordinates were equally aggrieved. They left Moscow agitated. "We got a wet rug in the face," Vance reflected. The Russians, he complained, had not negotiated in good faith, had not come back with counterproposals. He knew Soviet officials were agitated by the Americans' disre­

Brzezinski had prodded the U.S. delegation to "take a firm and unyielding stand in Moscow," hoping Brezh­

Carter, Vance, Brzezinski, and Secretary of Defense Brown subsequently acknowledged that the opening gambit in Moscow was ill advised, but they did not act that way at the time. 150 After Gromyko attacked the U.S. position publicly, Brezhnev wrote Carter, privately restating his desire for a strategic arms treaty and reaffirming his hopes for constructive interaction and coop­

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ocrats such as Senator Jackson and John C. Stennis, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee; arms control experts such as Paul Nitze; for­

mer members of the Ford administration such as Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger; and prominent military officials such as Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all assailed Soviet behavior and demanded that the U.S. administration negotiate from a posi­tion of strength. 134 Carter was unable to manage U.S. domestic opinion or guide events in Africa and the Middle East. "The currents of history were running against us," said Vance. 135

"You need incredibly gifted and disciplined leadership to run against histor­

tical tides," reflected Leslie Gelb, one of Vance's influential aides. 157 Yet neither in Moscow nor in Washington did such gifted leaders govern. Carter was disciplined and had noble goals. He "was trying to do great things" but "without preparation for doing them," Gelb reminisced. 137 Buffeted by events in the third world that he could not control, a domestic energy crisis that he could not master, and public ridicule that he could not deflect, Carter was nonetheless lured by a sense of self-confidence. He had faith in himself and in his God, faith in his abilities to get what he wanted through dogged­ness and determination, faith that the American way of life was more attrac­

The leaders in the Kremlin were aged, Brzezinski told Carter. They needed détente more than the United States did. Long-term trends favored the United States. There was "a rough overall asymmetrical equivalence in military capabilities," but the Soviet Union's economy was faltering, its dissident groups were growing, its rivalry with China was unremitting. 139 Unrest in Eastern Europe was mounting and would increase with détente, which was nonetheless an inescapable choice for Brezhnev, given the Soviet Union's eco­

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Supreme Soviet as well as general secretary of the Party. This move attested
to his ongoing resourcefulness when it came to Kremlin intrigue. Yet those
close to him were well aware of the steady decline in his health and vigor and
the steady growth of his vanity and greed. Brezhnev loved his comforts, col­
clected more and more cars, and never ceased to appreciate the medals and
awards his colleagues bestowed on him. He still liked to play dominoes, hunt,
and swim. But the robust and handsome man who had impressed so many
with his zest and appearance in the 1950s and 1960s was becoming a sad
shadow of himself.

Brezhnev had had a stroke in November 1974, and a second one in early
1976. He suffered from arteriosclerosis. He had trouble sleeping at night and
experienced frequent bouts of nervous exhaustion. He mustered his energy
for major occasions, such as meetings with Vance and other visiting digni­
taries, but took more and more days off. His dependency on tranquilizers
grew. He went to sleep late and got up late. He read less and less. He missed
more and more meetings. He spoke haltingly. The speeches drafted for him
contained shorter and shorter phrases and were written in larger and larger
letters. He had trouble seeing and hearing. His ability to concentrate waned.
He depended more and more on a few close friends and associates, such as
Konstantin Chernenko, Andropov, and Ustinov, who sheltered and protected
him and who, in turn, benefited greatly from the general secretary's patron­
age. 141

Brezhnev's poor health made it difficult for him to stay focused on his
priorities, and he could not control events. He cared not "a damn" about
the Horn of Africa, said Dobrynin, but he could not resist the pleas of
revolutionaries fighting imperialism and racism, or squelch the ardor of
independent-minded clients, such as Fidel Castro. Nor could he dampen the
fervor of party ideologues or thwart the pressures of defense officials eager to
employ the growing Soviet military capabilities. Turbulence in the interna­
tional system created opportunities they found hard to resist, and Brezhnev's
failure to rein them in created problems he could not have imagined. The
sick and aged general secretary had more medals, more titles, and more au­
thority than ever before, but his capacity to shape events was severely circum­
scribed. 142

Clients, Hegemons, and Allies

In the spring of 1977, Fidel Castro made a goodwill trip to Africa, where he
was welcomed as a hero. For more than a decade he had been supporting lib­
eration movements there, sending doctors, nurses, and military advisers, and
finally, in the case of Angola, combat troops. 143 Castro acted out of convic­
tion, believing he, too, was part of the contest for the soul of mankind. Fight­
ing imperialism, capitalism, and racism, he went to the Horn of Africa in
March and met sequentially with Mohammad Siad Barre, the ruler of Som­
lia, and Mengistu Haile Mariam, the military officer who ran Ethiopia after
the assassination of Emperor Haile Selassie.

Castro tried to mediate the conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia. Som­
lia wanted to regain territory, the Ogaden, that had been incorporated into
the Ethiopian empire in the late nineteenth century. Siad wanted to take ad­
vantage of the civil strife in Ethiopia while Mengistu was struggling to consol­
idate his power, having murdered many friends as well as foes. In the early
1970s, Siad had struck up an alliance with the Soviet Union, secured substan­
tial aid, and allowed the Kremlin to build a military base at Berbera, on the
Indian Ocean. Equipped with Russian guns and tanks, Siad readied to attack
Ethiopia. Castro tried and failed to keep the peace.

Castro next flew to Berlin in early April to talk with Erich Honecker, the
leader of East Germany, and then on to Moscow, to meet Brezhnev and his
comrades. "I developed the impression that there was a real revolution taking
place in Ethiopia," Castro said. Land was being redistributed. Reforms were
taking place in the cities. "Rightists" fought back, but Mengistu arrested and
shot them. He "strikes me," Castro continued, "as a quiet, honest and con­
vincing leader who is aware of the power of the masses." In his view, the
dictatorial and murderous Mengistu merited support far more than Siad Barre,
who was a chauvinist and a fraud, feigning "a socialist face" in order to get
aid from the Soviet Union. Siad had rebuffed Castro's mediation efforts and
was trying to grab Ethiopian land and endanger Mengistu's revolution.

"The socialist countries are faced with a problem," Castro told Honecker.
If they help Ethiopia, they will lose Siad Barre's friendship. If they don't, "the
Ethiopian Revolution will founder." That would be a pity, he said, be­
cause revolutionary fervor was spreading across black Africa. Castro had
just been to Mozambique and Angola, and was thrilled with the work being
THE EROSION OF DÉTENTE, 1975-80

Mengistu Haile Mariam, 1977. The Ethiopian revolutionary leader impressed Castro and garnered huge amounts of aid from Moscow.

done by Soviet and Cuban advisers. "The revolution in Ethiopia is of great significance... In Africa we can inflict a severe defeat on the entire imperialist policy. We can free Africa from the influence of the USA and of the Chinese... Ethiopia has a great revolutionary potential."

In Moscow, where Castro was welcomed warmly—"Dear Comrade Fidel Castro," said Brezhnev, "all Soviet people express feelings of friendship, love and respect for you"—Cuba's revolutionary hero pressed the case for Mengistu, and Soviet leaders listened sympathetically. The Ethiopians, they said, having "experienced enormous sufferings and humiliations during imperialist domination," were acting naturally, "departing from the capitalist roads and setting their bearings on socialism." Brezhnev talked in Moscow, much as his colleagues did when they visited Africa. "We Soviet people," they liked to say, recognized "our youth" in the struggle of Africa's nationalist leaders to liberate their people. Their effort to "advance towards a new life is reminiscent in a way of our own road."

Responding to Castro's importuning and to the advice of the Soviet embassy in Addis Ababa, Kremlin officials welcomed Mengistu to their capital in May 1977. Just before arriving, he had closed down American bases and research centers in Ethiopia. In Moscow, Mengistu declared, as he had many times before, that he was a Marxist-Leninist. His revolution, he told Brezhnev, was part of "the world revolutionary process." He pleaded for economic aid and military supplies. He said he faced an invasion from Somalia, a separatist rebellion in Eritrea, and incessant opposition from domestic rightists.

Having been slow to meet Mengistu's previous requests, Soviet leaders now offered significant aid, estimated at $350-450 million, and signed a declaration of friendly relations between the two nations. They had no great plans, no strategic vision. Some Politburo members and influential military officers were opposed to getting embroiled in Ethiopia. But Defense Minister Ustinov and Communist Party Secretary Ponomarev could not resist tempta-
tion. Flush with hard currency from Soviet exports of oil and natural gas and embarrassed by the loss of Soviet influence in Egypt after the Yom Kippur War, they were eager to project Soviet power and influence. Their decision making was “primitive,” reflected General Anatoli Gribkov, who at the time had been deputy commander in chief of the Warsaw Pact joint armed forces. As soon as Mengistu and leaders of other African countries mentioned the word socialism, Gribkov sneered, Kremlin elders would succumb to their entreaties. “They wanted that country to instantaneously exchange their donkeys for Mercedes or Fords.”

Even as they decided to support Mengistu, top leaders in the Kremlin reaffirmed their support for détente. Sending weapons and advisers abroad, in their view, did not breach détente. This was no different from what Washington did when opportunity beckoned. Soviet arms sales were increasing but were still much smaller than those of the United States. For Brezhnev and his colleagues, the Horn of Africa was a sideshow. They did not want Soviet actions there to undercut détente. Détente, they liked to say, “should spread to all parts of the earth so that peoples all over the world . . . should be able to avail themselves of its fruits.”

Carter and his advisers did not think the Soviets meant what they said. The president distrusted the Soviet moves in the Horn of Africa and despised the brutality of Mengistu’s regime. Although Carter was told that Soviet assistance to Mengistu was limited and that the Horn of Africa was “not of great strategic importance to the United States,” he regarded the Soviet maneuverings as portentous. His statecraft was being tested, Brzezinski wrote Carter on 8 July 1977. “Everyone is taking our measure.”

Still, the United States had an opportunity, said a presidential review memorandum, to advance its “influence in the [Horn] as a whole by consolidating our position in neighboring countries now friendly to us, e.g., Sudan and Kenya, and in advancing our position in Somalia.” Brzezinski advised Carter not to cooperate with the Soviets if they invited the United States to join them in efforts to end Somalia’s aggression. The Kremlin was in “a quandary,” caught between its former alliance with Siad and its new fondness for Mengistu, and the United States should exploit the Soviet predicament, insisted Brzezinski. Washington hoped the Russians would “fall off both horses,” Secretary Vance told the Chinese when he visited Beijing in August. Thinking that Mengistu’s regime might not survive and hoping that the Soviets might be ensnared in their own Vietnam, Carter’s advisers wanted to position the United States to advance its influence throughout the Horn while reminding the Soviets that they must stay loyal to the spirit of détente.

In September 1977, the future of events in the Horn was contingent as was the fate of détente. Somalia was attacking Ethiopia; Mengistu’s regime was tottering; the Cubans seemed to be hesitating; Brezhnev was giving aid to Mengistu yet appealing for peace in the region. Both Moscow and Washington appeared to want to extend their reach and expand their influence without jeopardizing possibilities to cooperate when it was in their interest to do so. When the Soviets uncovered information that the South African apartheid regime was developing nuclear weapons, they invited the United States to join in a collaborative demarche. And when they focused their attention on a Middle East settlement between Israel and its Arab neighbors, they presented Washington with a “remarkably balanced” document.

Vance was very interested in keeping détente alive, and he labored to collaborate with Gromyko on a joint statement regarding the Middle East. On 1 October, the United States and the Soviet Union announced their intention to reconvene in Geneva for another conference. Together, the Soviet and American governments would seek to arrange a Middle East settlement. Together, they would work for Israeli evacuation of occupied territory and for Arab recognition of Israel’s right to exist within secure borders. Together, they would promote normal relations between Arabs and Israelis and seek to gain respect for the rights of the Palestinian people.

Gromyko and Vance also resumed their work on a strategic arms treaty. The president still wanted the Soviet Union to reduce its nuclear arsenal below the levels envisioned at Vladivostok. He sought to limit the Kremlin’s most formidable intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and constrain the number of ICBMs that could carry multiple warheads. At the same time, he hoped to equip America’s heavy bombers with air-launched cruise missiles and to restrict the numbers of Soviet Backfire aircraft, which the United States regarded as a strategic weapon, not an intermediate-range aircraft, as the Soviets insisted it was.

When the Soviet foreign minister met Carter on 27 September, agreement was reached on many but not all of these issues. “There was a good spirit about this session,” wrote the president. He and Gromyko agreed that
SALT I, due to expire in October, would be extended, providing time
to complete work on SALT II and to begin designing the parameters of a
SALT III. Détente still had life. “My overall assessment,” Carter wrote Brezh­
nev on 4 November 1977, “is that progress is being made toward a more co­
operative and harmonious relationship between our two countries.”

But the two most powerful nations on earth were not in control of events.
The Jewish community in the United States and the government of Me­
nachem Begin in Israel ridiculed the proposals laid out by Gromyko and
Vance. While the Israelis elicited new concessions from Washington, the
Egyptian president Anwar Sadat decided to seize the initiative. Seeking to
break the impasse in Arab-Israeli relations, he announced that he would visit
Jerusalem and try to strike a deal with the Israelis. “We were stunned by Sa­
dat’s decision,” Vance recalled.

While the president moved quickly to work with Sadat and Begin, the So­
viet felt excluded from the ongoing drama. Brezhnev wrote Carter on
16 December: “The present moment is extremely serious and crucial.” Wash­
ington should not shut the Kremlin out of the peace process. Nor should it
exclude representatives from the Palestinian Liberation Organization from
the conference table. There was still a chance to work collaboratively.

Carter responded that the United States had neither conspired with Sadat
nor orchestrated the dramatic turn of events. The president invited the
Kremlin to encourage radical Arab states, such as Syria, to stop attacking
Sadat. Trying to reassure Brezhnev, Carter repeated that all the parties even­
tually would make their way to Geneva, where the Kremlin would most defi­
nitely have a role to play.

But the resentment of Soviet officials simmered. They were no fools. They
correctly intuited that Carter was backtracking from his promise to treat the
Soviet Union as an equal partner in the Middle East peace process. They
were right. “The Soviet Union should not be deeply involved,” wrote
Brzezinski.

If Sadat was the prime mover of events in the Middle East, Siad Barre
played a similar role in the Horn of Africa. He continued his aggression
against Ethiopia and supported the Eritrean independence movement. He
severed his alliance with the Kremlin, threw the Soviets out of their base in
Berbera, and looked to the West and to conservative Arab states, such as
Saudi Arabia, for assistance. In late October, Mengistu secretly made his way
back to Moscow. “Revolutionary Ethiopia,” Mengistu implored, had found
itself encircled and desperately required the support of the “first of all the so­
cialist states.”

The Soviets could not rebuff a revolutionary comrade. The Chinese
would mock them and maneuver for advantage in the region, while the
Cubans would be disillusioned and might be tempted to act on their own, as
they initially had done in Angola. Kremlin policymakers acted decisively.
They gave more than a billion dollars in military equipment to Mengistu’s
army. They also deployed about a thousand Soviet officers and advisers to
Ethiopia, coordinated the Ethiopian army’s moves, and helped to transport
more than seventeen thousand Cuban combat troops and technical experts
to the region. The top military brass in Moscow liked jousting with American
imperialists and demonstrating their military prowess so long as the rivalry
did not get out of hand.

While this was a dramatic manifestation of the Soviet Union’s power pro­
jection capabilities, Gromyko emphasized to Deputy Secretary of State War­
ren Christopher that the Kremlin would seek to control its new client. It
would not allow the Ethiopians to cross into Somalia. Ethiopian actions were
purely defensive, Gromyko insisted. Siad was the aggressor. Gromyko invited
joint Soviet-American efforts to stop the fighting. “If we could pool our ef­
forts this would be a good example of U.S.-Soviet cooperation.”

On 12 January 1978, Brezhnev again wrote to Carter. “Now that we
stepped over the threshold of the new year,” it was a propitious time to re­
view overall trends. He noted with satisfaction that both sides had shown
flexibility in the strategic arms talks, but he complained about U.S. plans to
develop a new type of nuclear weapon—the neutron bomb—whose purpose
was to kill people and reduce damage to surrounding property. He also
lamented how long SALT II was taking, even though the Kremlin had gone a
long way to meet the American position. “In all candor,” Brezhnev contin­
ued, “we do not see equivalent steps from the US side towards us.” The num­
ber one task for the new year, he insisted, was to conclude a strategic arms
limitation treaty. He then complained once again about unilateral American
actions in the Middle East and called for the restoration of a collaborative ap­
proach. As for the Horn of Africa, where “the USSR does not seek any ad­
vantages for itself,” he agreed with Carter that peace must be restored. A just
solution based on the cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of Somali
troops from Ethiopian territory was imperative. Last, Brezhnev reiterated his hopes for a relaxation of tensions in Europe and the promotion of commercial, scientific, and cultural exchanges. Overall, the agenda for the new year was formidable, but he was not discouraged.

Carter’s response ten days later expressed his gratification that the “predominant trend” in Soviet-American relations was constructive. He hoped to move swiftly to wrap up the SALT negotiations because he was worried about mounting public opposition to an agreement. He thought that Soviet rhetoric and Soviet actions were doing harm; the campaign against the neutron bomb seemed hypocritical when the Kremlin was deploying a far more destructive generation of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, the SS-20s. Moreover, Soviet claims of being excluded from the Middle East peace negotiations struck a false chord because the United States was not repudiating the idea of a conference in Geneva where Soviet officials could participate fully. Most of all, Carter stressed, the Kremlin’s use of proxies to advance its interests in the Horn of Africa was stirring unease. Carter concluded: “I discuss these difficult matters frankly in the earnest desire for a more cooperative relationship between our two countries.”

But when Carter went before Congress to give his State of the Union message, he paid little attention to Soviet-American relations. “The state of our Union is sound,” he began. “For the first time in a generation, we are not haunted by a major international crisis or by domestic turmoil, and we now have a rare and a priceless opportunity to address persistent problems and burdens.” The most overriding challenge was the energy shortage. “Every day we spend more than $120 million for foreign oil.” Underproduction and overconsumption sapped the nation’s financial strength and fueled inflation. “Our main task at home this year, with energy a central element, is the Nation’s economy.”

Only after addressing the need for tax cuts, fiscal prudence, regulatory reform, and a comprehensive energy program did Carter finally deal with the country’s foreign policy. He was optimistic. The American people were strong, peaceful, and resilient. “We’ve restored a moral basis of our foreign policy. The very heart of our identity as a nation is our firm commitment to human rights.” His administration sought security, peace, and economic growth. The United States could compete with the Soviet Union if it had to but preferred to cooperate when it was opportune to do so. “We are negoti-ating with quiet confidence,” he said, “without haste, with careful determination, to ease the tensions between us.” But his mind was on more enduring values. His recent trip to India, Egypt, Poland, France, and Belgium had “crystallized for me the purposes of our Nation’s policy: to ensure economic justice, to advance human rights, to resolve conflicts without violence, and to proclaim in our great democracy our constant faith in the liberty and dignity of human beings everywhere.”

The president was still seeking to transcend the Cold War, but there were obstacles abroad and at home. Exchange fluctuations and monetary disorders were causing “growing concern,” wrote Helmut Schmidt, chancellor of West Germany, not only in his country but among all the NATO allies. These problems were not “transitory”—they resulted from the energy shortage and OPEC price hikes—and they portended a “crisis of considerable dimensions.” The whole world economic system was at risk, Schmidt warned. “This gives the problem a crucial political significance.”

Brzezinski admonished Carter that they needed to work harder on alliance cohesion. The NATO allies were also worried about the buildup of Warsaw Pact conventional forces and the deployment of SS-20s, and they feared that the Americans might negotiate an agreement with the Kremlin at their expense. “Political trends in Western Europe are ominous,” Brzezinski wrote. Italian moderates were cutting a deal with Italian communists; the left coalition of communists and socialists in France might win in the forthcoming elections; West German politics were manifesting neutralist tendencies. “In sum,” Brzezinski wrote, by the end of March “we could see major Communist advances in Europe, and then an important backlash at home with the administration being criticized for doing too little too late.”

Brzezinski tirelessly warned Carter that domestic support for his foreign-policy goals was fading. Carter was seen as “soft,” he wrote bluntly. Conservatives blasted Carter for wanting to reestablish relations with Cuba and for trying to heal wounds with Vietnam. They ridiculed him for his cancellation of important weapons programs, such as the B-1 bomber, and for cutting back U.S. forces in Korea. They scorned his negotiation of a canal treaty with Panama, his reaching out to Red China, and his bargaining with the Kremlin over strategic arms. Carter’s political advisers echoed Brzezinski, emphasizing to the president that it would be “very difficult” to get Senate approval of a strategic arms treaty.
Carter searched for help. Hoping to sustain détente, he tried to enlist the assistance of French president Valery Giscard d’Estaing and Marshal Broz Tito, the president of Yugoslavia. “It is important for Soviet leaders to understand the gravity of the situation,” he wrote Tito. “As you know, it is my earnest hope that we will be able to promote détente and to work with Soviet leaders in promoting mutual objectives in important areas of arms control. It would be regrettable if Soviet actions in Ethiopia made pursuit of those objectives more difficult, and complicated the process of reducing tensions and building a firmer basis for East-West relations.” 178

Not all the president’s advisers were happy with the link he was making between détente and the Horn of Africa. At a series of high-level meetings at the end of February and early March 1978, Secretary of State Vance expressed his disapproval. “Zbig, you yesterday and the President today” suggested that a SALT agreement was connected to Soviet behavior in Africa. “I think it is wrong to say that,” he admonished. “We will end up losing SALT and that will be the worst thing that could happen. If we do not get a SALT treaty in the President’s first four years, that will be a blemish on his record forever.” 179

Brzezinski tenaciously defended his position. Ten thousand Cuban troops were moving into the Horn, and the Soviets were delivering arms and supplies estimated to be worth a billion dollars. “The Soviets should be made aware of the fact that they are poisoning the atmosphere.” They were exploiting a local conflict “for larger purposes. They are frightening more countries in the region and they are creating a precedent for more involvement elsewhere. . . If we allow the Soviets to send expeditionary forces to resolve territorial conflicts in ways that are beneficial to them, then we are going to have more and more problems.”

Brzezinski wanted the United States to take action. He wanted to send a naval task force to the Red Sea to convey political signals, to demonstrate to critics at home and friends abroad that the United States meant business. Friends and allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, were watching closely. They should be made to see that the United States would not permit the Soviets to fish in troubled waters. Washington must raise the costs of the Soviets’ and Cubans’ African interventions. “We should get the regional powers to act and make the Soviets and Cubans bleed.” 180

The “conundrum,” as Vice President Mondale pointed out, was that in
Brzezinski was unrelenting. Other analysts claimed the Soviets might be acting opportunistically, but he disagreed. He saw a design. Soviet actions portended a plan to choke the oil lanes on which the United States, Western Europe, and Japan were sorely dependent. If America did not react strongly, friends, allies, and neutrals would lose faith in American resolve; countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran might distance themselves from Washington.

“If the Soviets do not conclude that we are prepared to stand up to them, you can only anticipate worsening difficulties in the years ahead.”

Carter scribbled on one of Zbig’s memos: “I’m concerned but we mustn’t overreact.” He bided his time. He was preoccupied trying to get the Senate to ratify the Panama Canal Treaty. “It’s hard to concentrate on anything except Panama,” he jotted in his diary. SALT was just one of many matters on his agenda, and it did not have high priority. No longer was he waging a Cold War, but neither was he hustling for détente.

The delays in the SALT talks and the carping over the Horn of Africa exasperated the Soviet Union. Brezhnev dearly wanted progress. On 27 February, he wrote Carter, again emphasizing that a strategic arms treaty must be a top priority. He reiterated his concerns about American intentions to develop a neutron bomb and his country’s alleged exclusion from the Middle East peace process. “No less puzzling,” he said, were allegations that the Soviet Union was seeking unilateral gain in the Horn of Africa. Soviet policy, Brezhnev insisted, has “the sole purpose of restoring justice and peace in that region .... If Somalia withdraws its troops from Ethiopia, ... then the cause of the conflict would cease to exist.” He address these issues, he concluded, “not for the sake of polemics,” but because “practical constructive measures in Soviet-US relations is becoming ever more urgent.”

Ambassador Dobrynin reinforced all these points with Secretary Vance. The leadership in Moscow was genuinely upset that nothing was being accomplished. Brzezinski’s “Polish temperament made him strongly anti-Soviet,” Dobrynin told Harriman. Kremlin officials were not, in fact, pursuing any grand design but acting as a great power, extending their strategic reach and their diplomatic influence, not orchestrating developments, seeking confrontation, or manipulating Mengistu. Among friends, Soviet officials acknowledged not only that Mengistu was hard to control but that his brutality was appalling. They would not allow him to use Soviet equipment to cross into Somali territory. They also tried to persuade him to accept Eritrea’s autonomy. Even the Cubans were struggling to contain, rather than encourage, Mengistu’s ambitions.

At a secret meeting in Havana on 16 March 1978, Vice President Carlos Rafael Rodriguez explained the Cuban perspective to Thomas L. Hughes, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Hughes, a
former head of the Intelligence and Research Division of the State Department, was conveying an unofficial message from Carter, objecting to Soviet and Cuban behavior in Africa as deeply disappointing, since it was colliding with the administration's hopes to remove the Cold War from Africa and normalize relations with Cuba.

Rodriguez, now the number three person in the Cuban hierarchy, just below Fidel and his brother, Raul, listened intently. He "was alert, intelligent, suave, at times witty and charming," wrote Hughes, "very much the self-confident, consummate political ideologue and international strategist which he (and others) consider him to be." Rodriguez systematically enumerated the degrees to which he believed American officials were exaggerating Cuba's role in Libya, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique. He gave a long account of Fidel's interactions with Siad and Mengistu. Siad had violated his promise not to invade, and then tried to justify his aggression based on Cuba's intervention. "When Siad Barre said we had 20,000 Cuban troops in Ethiopia, we had no more than 300 specialists." Cubans were not seeking to stir up trouble in Africa, Rodriguez insisted. They were trying to constrain Mengistu and get him to settle with the Eritreans. "Our African involvements have often been against our wishes and have been undertaken knowing that they complicate our general political aims. We are not agitating Africa. Indeed in Ethiopia . . . we are acting as conservatives responding to government requests, defending borders, preserving the established status quo. We do this for principle's sake."

Castro believed he had revolutionary obligations, said Rodriguez. But he was not looking for trouble. He wanted to normalize relations with the United States. But he, too, was responding to circumstances he could not control, to the dynamics of local revolutionary forces, and to the breakdown of imperial and racist rule in Africa. The United States government did not want to face reality, Rodriguez suggested. Fidel was beleaguered with requests from African heads of state for assistance, bombarded with requests for aid to revolutionary movements fighting apartheid in southern Africa. "We keep turning down requests which are difficult for us to do."

Cuba did not want to intervene further, said Rodriguez, and did want détente with Washington. The United States was a great capitalist power, he acknowledged. "We don't like that, but we are realists. . . . Convergence of interest produces international détente." But if white racists attack Mo-
consistent with human nature. It's the most effective way to organize society for the common good." The challenge, as he understood it, "was to defend our values fearlessly, while tirelessly working to prevent war."

To meet the challenge, he would try something new. On 16 March 1978, Carter informed Secretary of State Vance and Vice President Mondale that he was sending his national security adviser to Beijing to talk to Mao's heirs.

The China Card

During a very contentious discussion among Carter's advisers on 2 March 1978 about Ethiopia, Secretary of Defense Brown suddenly interjected: "I have an idea re China. The Chinese are less concerned about [who is] the aggressor. Why don't we get together with the Chinese . . . and issue a joint statement of concern about the Horn and append to it a statement that we will consult on other areas where we have a joint interest? That would get the Soviets' attention."

Vance objected. "That would get their attention but we are at the point where we are on the brink of ending up with a real souring of relations between ourselves and the Soviet Union and it may take a helluva long while to change and may not be changed for years." We should think carefully "before we go down that road," he admonished.

Brzezinski relentlessly pushed Carter down that road. From the outset, he had believed the United States and China "had parallel strategic interests against the Soviet Union" that made them natural partners. "We have failed to use the China card against the Soviets," he noted to Carter in a particularly strident weekly analysis on 21 April 1978. Carter, of course, had been thinking of normalizing relations with China since the first days of his presidency, and had sent Vance to China in August 1977 to explore possibilities. But the Chinese insisted that the United States must sever its ties with Taiwan before opening formal diplomatic relations with Beijing, which Carter knew would cause political acrimony at home and endanger ratification of the Panama Canal treaties. So he had put China on a back burner. Detente had priority. Panama had priority.

But having won a landmark legislative victory with the ratification of the first Panama treaty and facing growing public disillusionment with the Soviet Union, Carter decided that it made sense to try again to normalize relations with China. Like Vance, he did not want this rapprochement to damage relations with the Kremlin. In fact, he hoped that establishing formal diplomatic ties with Beijing would make the Soviet Union more tractable while also positioning the United States to compete more effectively in the third world.

"We all agreed that a better relationship with the PRC would help us with SALT," he wrote in his diary. Vance concurred. Normalization might "strengthen our hand in securing ratification of SALT II."

Vance did not want Brzezinski to be the administration's emissary to Beijing, but the national security adviser convinced the president that he was the right man for the mission. Brzezinski conferred with Carter and then drafted his own instructions, which the president reviewed carefully and issued in his own name. His visit was not tactical, said Carter. "The United States and China . . . have parallel, long-term strategic concerns. The most important of these is our common opposition to global or regional hegemony by any single power."

Brzezinski went to China feeling "exhilarated." He had outmaneuvered Vance and now had the chance to compete with Kissinger for the fame and glory that surrounded a reestablishment of normal diplomatic relations with China after more than two decades of nonrecognition. "The opening of China in 1972 had been a bold stroke, of the greatest geopolitical significance," wrote Brzezinski, "and I was determined to succeed in transforming that still-tenuous relationship into something more enduring and more extensive."

Between 20 and 22 May 1978, Brzezinski spent many hours in Beijing talking to Foreign Minister Huang Hua, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, and Party Chairman Hua Guofeng. China was going through a period of remarkable change after the death of Mao in 1976. Among the leaders, there was much internecine strife, and Deng was about to consolidate his power. Brzezinski immediately liked him. He "was tiny in size, but great in his boldness." "Bright, alert, and shrewd," Deng "was quick on the uptake, with a good sense of humor, tough, and very direct." He spoke much less than Brzezinski but made his points clearly, as Brzezinski had anticipated. "In the relations between our two countries," Deng declared, "the question of normalization is of fundamental importance." The United States had to reaffirm the commitments already made by Kissinger, state that there was but one China, terminate diplomatic relations with Taiwan, sever its defense treaty,
and end its arms shipments. China would not renounce its right to liberate Taiwan, as the United States had wanted, maintaining that it was an internal matter. The United States could, however, make a unilateral statement of its own expectations. Working out these arrangements would not be too difficult, said Deng. It was a question of resolve. It was up to President Carter to determine whether he really wanted to take the requisite steps to establish normal ties with the People’s Republic. And once formal diplomatic relations were established, Chinese officials would then gladly visit the United States and collaborate in “cooping with the Polar bear.” Deng sneered at U.S. efforts to relax tensions with the Kremlin. He scorned détente. “Soviet strategy is fixed and will not change. They will try to squeeze in wherever there is an opening.” The United States, he said flatly, “is not strong enough in its actions.”

“President Carter is a very unusual person,” Brzezinski assured Deng, “one who is decisive, who likes challenges, whose entire political career has involved taking on causes where he started behind and where he ended on top.” He now had made up his mind. He wanted the United States to have normal diplomatic relations with China. But Brzezinski did not want to focus on the details of normalization or on the future of Taiwan. He much preferred to focus on grand strategy. He defended the U.S. policy of détente as tough-minded and realistic.

The American-Soviet relationship will remain for a very long time to come fundamentally a competitive and in some respects a hostile relationship, but there are also some cooperative aspects to it which stem from mutual interest and particularly from the need to restrict or to confine the dangers of a nuclear war. Accordingly, American policy toward the Soviet Union must be one which combines sustained political competition with occasional willingness to cooperate and to accommodate. Unfortunately, the occasional accommodation and cooperation is misunderstood by some people as termination of the rivalry.

Luckily, Brzezinski went on to say, Soviet actions in Africa and elsewhere were now strengthening the influence of those officials in the United States who insisted that “Soviet designs are fundamentally aggressive and . . . must be resolutely resisted. This brings me to the question of more tangible cooperation between China and the U.S.”

On the next day, 22 May, Party Chairman Hua told Brzezinski that the United States “should not use China as a pawn in order to improve its relations with the Soviet Union. You should have a long-term strategic viewpoint.” Brzezinski assured him that the United States did indeed have strategic vision, and he knew the Soviet Union was basically hostile. He wanted to discuss how the United States and China could begin to cooperate in commercial, military, scientific, and cultural matters. Recognizing that the Chinese were reluctant to arrange details before the issue of Taiwan was resolved, Brzezinski simply repeated to China’s head of state, “President Carter has made up his mind.” “We will observe the actual action,” retorted Hua.

The flavor of the discussions is best captured by the toasts offered by Brzezinski and Foreign Minister Huang at their formal dinner on the first night, 20 May. “Though China and the United States,” said Huang, having different social systems and ideologies and though there are fundamental differences between us, our two countries do hold common or similar views on a number of questions in the present international situation. . . . The present-day world is full of contradictions, and the international situation is marked by turbulence and drastic change. The struggle for hegemony is the main source of global intranquillity. [sic] The shadow of social-imperialism can be seen in almost all the changes and disturbances in every part of the world. . . . Hegemonism, though blustering and menacing, is a paper tiger.

Thanking the Chinese for their hospitality, Brzezinski responded:

Our two societies are rooted in different traditions and are based on different views about the nature of man and the purposes of government. But one does not have to share in your ideology to respect your civilization, your history, and your determination to defend your nation, to develop your country and to promote the welfare of your people.

The admiration and friendship which the American people
Brzezinski returned from China euphoric. Carter warmly congratulated him but then told his national security adviser that he had been seduced by the Chinese. Carter wanted to normalize relations with Beijing, but he was not willing to set aside détente. When Brzezinski gave a series of interviews revealing his distrust of the Kremlin, Carter was displeased. The president smiled—it was a smile, recalled Brzezinski, that said, “I like you but I’m really burning inside.” “You’re not just a professor, you speak for me,” said Carter. “And I think you went too far in your statements. You put all of this responsibility on the Soviets. You said they were conducting a worldwide vitriolic campaign encircling and penetrating the Middle East, placing troops on the Chinese frontier. All this simply just went a little too far.”

Carter told his advisers that after the November elections they should work toward a normalization agreement with the Chinese, and should also pursue the elusive SALT agreement. In a major speech at the Naval Academy commencement, he chided the Kremlin for its aggressiveness, military buildup, and attempts to exploit unrest in Africa. But he also beckoned for cooperation. “Our long-term objective must be to convince the Soviet Union of the advantages of cooperation and of the costs of disruptive behavior.” When the president’s message was criticized by the media as reflecting the tug of war between Brzezinski and Vance, he tried to clarify his views during a news conference on 26 June:

At the end of May, Carter and Vance talked to Gromyko in Washington, and in mid-July Vance met him again in Geneva. These exchanges were characterized by tough, sometimes brutally frank accusations, yet they illuminated the deeper desire on both sides to resolve their differences and reach a SALT II agreement. Vance told Gromyko the Soviets were setting fires in Africa. Gromyko indignantly denied it. The Soviet Union was not intervening in Rhodesia, Namibia, or Zaire, he insisted. That it had an ideological influence on Africa was true. This was natural, inevitable, “because for many years the Soviet Union had argued against colonialism and racism.” Carried away, Gromyko denied meddling even in Ethiopia. “There was no Soviet Napoleon in Africa,” he told Carter. Nor were the Soviets aiming for military superiority; they merely desired security, like the United States. When Vance reiterated that U.S. officials wanted peace and détente, Gromyko asked for deeds, not words.

Two issues dogged the SALT negotiations other than Soviet actions in Africa and American diplomacy in the Middle East. Brezhnev and Gromyko despised the renewed American emphasis on human rights and hated U.S. efforts to play the China card. On 21 July, President Carter released a statement: “I speak today with the sadness the whole world feels at the sentence given Anatoly Shcharansky.” Shcharansky, a Russian Jew, had been officially charged with espionage and treason. Sentenced to three years in prison and ten years in a labor camp, he had been allegedly conspiring with the CIA to foment dissent, encourage Jewish emigration, and stir up trouble among Jews who had been refused permission to leave the Soviet Union. “We are all sobered,” said Carter, “by this reminder that, so late in the 20th century, a
person can be sent to jail for asserting his basic human rights." When the president raised Shcharansky's case directly with Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister barely controlled his furor. "I never saw Gromyko so mad as at that time. Never in my life," recalled Dobrynin. Gromyko was a cultured man, said the Soviet ambassador, an able diplomat, usually very controlled, very self-disciplined, occasionally displaying a sardonic wit. But on this occasion, he was almost apoplectic. Why in the world, he exclaimed to Dobrynin, was Carter dwelling on human rights rather than discussing matters they could resolve, like SALT? Soviet authorities were trying to quell the unanticipated efforts of dissidents in their own country and in Eastern Europe to enforce the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. The Helsinki Agreement was fast becoming a rallying point for proponents of freedom and self-determination throughout the communist world. In Czechoslovakia, writers, intellectuals, and former supporters of the Prague Spring formed Charter 77 and appealed to their government to honor the Final Act. In Poland, the Workers' Self-Defense Committee, the KOR, protested the rise in food prices, pressed for the right to organize, and clamored for higher wages. In the republics of the Soviet Union, nationalists in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, and Lithuania struggled to revive their cultural and ethnic identity in the face of Russian domination. Soviet authorities wanted to thwart these groups without engaging in widespread repression. They arrested key leaders, and then deeply resented American expressions of sympathy for the dissidents.

Criticism of the prison sentences was coming at a time when thousands of people were being executed in China, and Soviet leaders saw the U.S. position as hypocritical—s wording Moscow while embracing Beijing. Brzezinski told the president that a previous estimate of executions in China had been updated, and the new figure was as high as twenty thousand, an estimate "based on reports by foreign travelers in China" and relying on notices posted at twenty courts "well distributed around the PRC. The final figure was then extrapolated from the fact that more than 2,000 Chinese courts had the power to impose the death sentence." Carter jotted on Brzezinski's weekly message: "Keep me informed." Yet this new information did not deflect the process of normalizing relations with the People's Republic of China. Gromyko warned Carter and Vance not to play a "dirty game," not to collude with China against the Soviet Union. But Brzezinski kept pushing in this direction, often flagrantly excluding State Department officials who needed to be informed and end-running Secretary Vance, who wanted progress with China to advance in tandem with progress on SALT.

Brzezinski recognized the Soviet sensibility, but he was not swayed by it. The Chinese were "leaning to one side, this time toward the U.S.," he informed Carter on 1 September 1978. "By doing so, the Chinese hope to accentuate strains in the U.S. détente process. . . . The implications for the Soviet Union are profound." The United States, he reiterated, could reap "beneficial security and economic dividends." The opportunity must be grasped.

While President Carter was focusing on mediating an agreement between Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat at Camp David, Brzezinski's focus never wandered from America's strategic competition with the Soviet Union. He cited new intelligence reports outlining further increments in Soviet military capabilities and lambasted the State Department for leaks regarding China and for its efforts to normalize relations with Vietnam, a move bound to antagonize the Chinese, who now viewed Vietnam as a Soviet client. Brzezinski was alarmed by the unrest in Iran and the drift of events in Afghanistan, and he was ever more determined to move ahead on China. The president sought to cool his ardor. In Carter's view, his national security adviser was "exalting" the China issue. But Brzezinski would not let it go, and worked deliberately to finalize arrangements while Vance was traveling in the Middle East and preparing for another round of talks with Gromyko on SALT.

On 15 December, Brzezinski told Ambassador Dobrynin that Washington and Beijing would immediately announce the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between their two countries and that Deng would visit the United States in January. Dobrynin "looked absolutely stunned," recalled Brzezinski. "His face turned kind of gray and his jaw dropped." In fact, Dobrynin was not stunned, just angry. In Geneva, where Vance was meeting Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister was even angrier at the news. "There was a violent anger," recalled Marshal Shulman, Vance's expert on Soviet affairs.

The opening with China came just after Carter had mediated a stunning agreement at Camp David between Begin and Sadat providing for, among
Brzezinski's optimism, rather than the gloomy mood of American public opinion, infused Carter's State of the Union address on 23 January 1979. There were problems, to be sure—energy, inflation, and unemployment—but they could be solved through creative effort, an ingenious private sector, and a fiscally prudent government that did not overreach. "America has the greatest economic system in the world," exclaimed the president. "Let's reduce government interference and give it a chance to work." Confidence was growing again, he insisted. The nation was strong militarily but needed to get even stronger. National security "requires more than just military might." The peoples of the world were astir with new demands, new needs, new yearnings. "This demand for justice and human rights is a wave of the future." Neither superpower could dominate the world, but values would compete, and America's would prevail. "Our way of life, and what we stand for as a nation, continue to have magnetic international appeal."222

Carter was not giving up on détente. In a personal message he tried to reassure Brezhnev that normalization of ties with China "has no other purpose but to promote the cause of world peace... There is no greater priority in my government than the strengthening of relations between our two countries."223 In his State of the Union address, he reiterated: "The new foundation of international cooperation that we seek excludes no nation. Cooperation with the Soviet Union serves the cause of peace, for in this nuclear age, world peace must include the superpowers—and it must mean the control of nuclear arms."224 When a reporter noted that "Brezhnev is getting older and visibly more feeble," and asked what would happen if the Soviet leader disappeared from the scene, Carter answered: "I'm determined that our relations with the Soviet Union will improve as we go into the next two years."225

Brezhnev, too, was not giving up hope. He had met with Averell Harriman read from prep litted. The Sov but the United lish its predom made no sense, at the expense that the Kremlin
sort were preposterous. When Harriman fulsomely expressed goodwill, Brezhnev was vividly moved. Tears welling in his eyes, he repeated to Harriman that he wanted to improve ties with the United States. He eagerly awaited a meeting with Carter once the strategic arms agreement was finalized.226

Among his Warsaw Pact comrades, Brezhnev spoke more candidly, but his message was much the same. Overlooking Carter’s desire to halt the arms race and constrain new weapons programs, like the B-1 bomber, Brezhnev said the Americans could not stomach the Soviet Union’s great strategic gains. Officials in Washington found it hard to accept parity. They wanted to overturn the existing correlation of forces and “impose their will and their ways on the rest of the world.” They were spending huge sums on modernizing their arsenal and seeking new weapons of mass destruction. They were angling to apply economic leverage and scheming to sunder the unity of the Warsaw Treaty Organization. At the same time, “They have already begun to feed China, to supply it with weapons, and to push it toward hostile excursions against the socialist countries, as was done some time ago in Europe during the years of the shameful Munich policies.”

Capitalism faced a severe crisis, Brezhnev said. The imperialists could not deal with their energy shortages, unemployment, or soaring inflation. They were choking with anger about the contraction of their imperialist domain in Asia and Africa. Laos was taking a socialist turn, revolutions were occurring in Angola, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan, struggles for independence were escalating in Rhodesia and Namibia, and the racist regime in South Africa was beginning to founder. There was turbulence in Iran and Nicaragua, stirring even greater alarm. Around the globe, imperialists saw evidence of their own demise, but as they had since 1917, they claimed that Moscow was fomenting the unrest. They refused to acknowledge the ineluctable workings of their own system. They refused to admit that revolutions ripen and grow on domestic turf.

Imperialists would seek to thwart the flow of history. Some imperialist politicians would try to clamp down on workers’ movements, reconcile divisions among themselves, and lash out at détente. Danger must not be ignored. “Our sacred duty to our own peoples,” said Brezhnev, “to the cause of socialism, is not to allow imperialism to break the correlation of forces, which has been achieved at the price of so many sacrifices, and which in itself repre-

sents the most important guarantee against nuclear war in the present times.”227

Although vigilance was always necessary, Brezhnev made clear to his allies that he was not abandoning his quest for a SALT agreement and other forms of arms control. Since the West was alarmed by the growth of Soviet SS-20s in Europe, Brezhnev said he would discuss this matter on the basis of equality and reciprocity. “We oppose the arms race,” he told his Warsaw Pact allies. We “do not plan to attack anybody, and we are always prepared to dissolve the military blocs.” During the forthcoming year, he hoped to meet with Carter, sign a strategic arms treaty, and inject “a positive current into the development of Soviet-American relations once again.”228

Brezhnev would not abandon hope that relations with the United States could be improved. “The task set by life itself—is to put an end to the unrestrained arms race.” Responding to questions from Time magazine reporters, he emphasized, “Goodneighborliness—regardless of differences in political system and views—is the best line in interstate relations. And I am deeply convinced that Soviet-American relations can be not just normal, but truly good.”229

Iran and Afghanistan

Few places on earth experienced more political turbulence in 1978 than southwest Asia. In Iran, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had sat on the throne since 1941. He had consolidated his authority over the country in 1953, after the CIA helped topple Mohammad Mosaddeq, the populist and nationalist prime minister. For the next twenty-five years, the Shah became a major U.S. ally, receiving economic aid, technical assistance, and military hardware and providing the United States with Persian Gulf oil and surveillance capabilities on the very border of the Soviet Union. During the middle 1970s, the Shah’s control of his country started to unravel. His long-term efforts to modernize Iran, curb the influence of Islam, accelerate industrial development, build military prowess, and operate as a regional powerhouse bred opposition. Islamic clergymen and large landowners despised his efforts to promote land reform and alter traditional customs. Professionals and middle-class people grew disillusioned when his economic initiatives were not ac-
companied by political reforms. Workers and students were disaffected when rapid economic growth subsided in the mid-1970s and unemployment and inflation eroded their opportunities. Moreover, the Shah's violent yet sporadic repression of political foes intensified opposition. Leftists, moderates, and Islamic reformers focused their wrath on the Shah while competing for support in urban streets and rural towns.

From exile in Iraq and then in Paris, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini spat forth his hatred of the Shah, of America, and of modernity. Like the communists, he called for justice and blamed the woes of humankind on capitalist greed; unlike the communists, whom he detested, he called for the restoration of God's law, the Sharia. Political Islam had found a voice. 230 

Carter observed these developments with growing consternation. Throughout 1978, there were strikes, demonstrations, and riots in Iran. Ten to twelve thousand people were killed, and another forty-five to fifty thousand, injured. "The country was literally afire," writes James A. Bill, a scholar of Iran who visited the country at the end of 1978. 231 But not until the fall of that year did Carter and his advisers recognize the full dimensions of the crisis. They did not blame the Soviet Union—the Shah's problems were of his own making—but the implications for U.S. economic, strategic, and diplomatic interests were profound. 232 Iranian oil fueled the economies of Western Europe and Japan; its monitoring sites and airfields enabled the United States to gather critical information on Soviet missile developments and strategic capabilities; the Shah's friendship was believed to enhance Washington's prestige and influence throughout the Persian Gulf and was of invaluable assistance to Israel. "The disintegration of Iran," Brzezinski wrote the president on 28 December 1978, "would be the most massive American defeat since the beginning of the Cold War, overshadowing in its real consequences the setback in Vietnam." 233 

Brzezinski wanted Carter to take more determined action to buck up the Shah or to align the United States behind a military coup, either policy designed to sustain America's long-term influence in the country. In early December, he asked the Defense Department to make contingency plans for deploying U.S. forces to Iran to guard the oil fields. He wrote President Carter on 2 December:

If you draw an arc on the globe stretching from Chittagong (Bangladesh) through Islamabad to Aden, you will be pointing to the area of currently our greatest vulnerability. . . .

There is no question that we are confronting the beginning of a major crisis, in some ways similar to the one in Europe in the late 40's. Fragile social and political structures in a region of vital importance to us are threatened with fragmentation.

The resulting political vacuum might well be filled by elements more sympathetic to the Soviet Union. . . .

If the above analysis is correct, the West as a whole may be faced with a challenge of historic proportions. A shift in Iranian/Saudi orientation would have a direct impact on trilateral cohesion [meaning the United States, Western Europe, and Japan], and it would induce in time more "neutralist" attitudes on the part of some of our key allies. In a sentence, it would mean a fundamental shift in the global structure of power. 234
The Kremlin anticipated the possibility of U.S. intervention in Iran. It monitored developments there carefully, realizing its own incapacity to shape events, but knowing it would be the winner if the Shah were toppled and the Americans ejected. On 17 November, Brezhnev informed Carter that he had received information about an impending U.S. military intervention. "We would not want to believe it," he wrote, "but, unfortunately, it is difficult for us to judge the real intentions of the United States." Conveniently forgetting the Kremlin's actions in Czechoslovakia in 1968, he emphasized that U.S. intervention would violate the U.N. Charter and endanger Soviet security. He suggested that the Soviet and American governments issue statements renouncing intervention. Such declarations would comport with the U.N. Charter and help the cause of "universal peace and international security."

Carter replied that the United States would not intervene in Iran, but that he still supported the Shah and intended to retain a "strong bilateral political, economic, and security relationship" with his country. Worried that the Kremlin might use rumors of American action to justify its own intervention, Carter told Brezhnev to stay out of Iran. "I am sure you appreciate that any such interference would be a matter of the utmost gravity to us."  

In January 1979 the Shah left Iran, transferring power to a coalition government. "Millions of Iranians took to the streets in an ecstasy of personal and political celebration that demonstrated the depths of their disaffection [with the Shah]," writes James Bill. The trend of events now portended the ascendancy of a radical Islamic government, headed directly or indirectly by Ayatollah Khomeini. Brzezinski, however, minimized the threat of political Islam and kept his focus on Iran's communist left, which, in his view, was tied to Moscow. But Carter possessed greater insight. Events in Iran, he said, demonstrated that a "relatively few militants, who had deep and fervent commitments," could succeed "against an all-powerful military force and an entrenched government .... I think this would tend to inspire or to instigate uprisings among the Palestinians, for instance, or other militant groups, in the future, to assert their authority."  

Yet Carter was deeply committed to nonintervention. All through the Iranian crisis, Vietnam was much on his mind. American military embroilments in foreign civil wars were bound to fail and were incompatible with U.S. beliefs. Détente required self-discipline in the face of strategic setbacks. "In our generation, we've had a hundred new nations formed. And they go through a traumatic experience when they shake off colonialism or establish their own government. Quite often they turn to the Soviet Union... but eventually they turn to a more stable interrelationship and they become more nationalistic in spirit." Patience, therefore, was imperative. The "most important single responsibility on my shoulders is to have peace, an improved understanding, consultation, communication with the Soviet Union, because on the super powers' shoulders rests the responsibility for peace throughout the world."  

The question was whether the Soviet government agreed. If it did, would it exert the same self-discipline? At the very time that Carter was making these remarks, officials in the Kremlin faced a similar crisis in Iran's neighbor to the east, Afghanistan. In that country, Soviet hopes about an unexpected opportunity were rapidly shifting to anxieties about inchoate danger. 

At the end of April 1978, the Afghan Communist Party, formally known as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), had seized power in Kabul. Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud had earlier arrested several members of the party, and the communists had decided to strike back before they were wiped out. Soviet ambassador Aleksandr Puzanov was told about the coup shortly before it occurred. He opposed it, as did the Kremlin. The U.S.S.R. had cultivated cordial relations with Daoud's government and was not eager to see the PDPA come to power. 

The PDPA was divided into two factions, the Parchams and the Khalqs, who hated each other. Nur Mohammad Taraki, the Khalq leader, now became head of the government; Babrak Karmal, a leader of the Parchams, took the number two position; Hafizullah Amin, another Khalq, became a second vice prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. From the outset, Taraki and Amin worked closely, if suspiciously, with one another. Within days, they arrested thousands of people, among them many Parchams. 

Taraki and Amin were exhilarated by their success but understood their vulnerability. They needed help. The day after seizing power, they reproached the Kremlin for not supporting their revolutionary ardor but reaffirmed their commitment to Marxism-Leninism. They said they would build socialism in Afghanistan, and they requested military and economic aid. They told Ambassador Puzanov that they intended to conceal their true aims as
long as possible. Moscow could be assured, however, that in the conduct of their foreign policy they would stay nonaligned yet would cooperate with the Soviet Union. 242

The American embassy did not believe that the Soviet Union had played any role in the coup, and U.S. diplomats were initially uncertain about the identity of the new leaders, many of whom seemed young, leftist, and nationalistic. Then, on 6 May, Taraki asked U.S. ambassador Theodore Eliot to meet with him. Taraki “greeted me with a warm handshake and a friendly smile,” Eliot reported. The new head of state was a slim, white-haired, and engaging man with a professorial bent, and seemed older than his sixty-one years. He had spent several years in the United States as a young man, and spoke English. Taraki recalled his years in America happily, wrote Eliot, and said that Americans and Afghans shared similar traits.

Taraki’s real intent was to convey the magnitude of his ambitions, and he talked passionately, his eyes fiercely intense. A revolution would occur in Afghanistan, he said. Unlike their predecessors, Taraki and his colleagues “really care about the poor people of this country and have no interest in putting money in Swiss banks.” They wanted to provide bread, clothing, and shelter to those in need, to modernize and industrialize, to create good jobs and attract back to Afghanistan the many thousands of émigrés who, like him and Amin, had studied abroad. His government, Taraki said, “would judge other Governments by their willingness to help Afghanistan.” 243

There was no doubt about Soviet willingness to help a new revolutionary government in Afghanistan. The KGB and the International Department long had had ties with Taraki, Amin, and Karmal, although Karmal and his Parcham followers were their favorites. When Taraki and Amin shunted Karmal aside, the Kremlin was dismayed but not deterred. Suslov, Ponomarev, and Andropov were eager to capitalize on events. Quickly, they sent military supplies and economic aid; party ideologues and military specialists flocked to Kabul. 244 By mid-June, the U.S. embassy in Kabul reported to Washington that the new government “was overwhelmingly dependent on the Soviet Union. It cannot stay in power without Soviet help. It relies one hundred percent on the Soviet Union for military supplies and equipment, and increasingly on the Soviet Union for economic assistance... and for trade.” 245

But Soviet leaders quickly became displeased. Taraki and Amin purged
their Parcham opponents in the government and terrorized the Islamic opposition in the countryside. Soviet ambassador Puzanov ridiculed their methods and criticized their actions. Friends of Karmal escaped to Moscow, where they pled for Soviet intervention. In September, the Politburo sent Ponomarev to Kabul to persuade Taraki and Amin to stop persecuting their adversaries. They were fueling the opposition and endangering the fate of the revolution. They should improve the conditions of their people rather than destroy the lives of their foes, said Ponomarev. Taraki defended his actions and appealed for more assistance. Westerners and Americans, he explained, were tempting them with promises of aid. Ponomarev warned them not to be lured into a trap; the KGB was already receiving reports that Taraki and Amin might have ties with U.S. intelligence services.

In December 1978 the Kremlin invited Taraki and Amin to Moscow, where Brezhnev warmly welcomed them. Their revolution meant a “turning point in the age-old history of Afghanistan,” and relations would now assume a “qualitatively new character . . . permeated by a spirit of comradeship and revolutionary solidarity.” The new treaty of friendship and cooperation between the two governments, Brezhnev said, was designed to translate the goals of the April revolution into reality.

Soviet officials told the Khalq leaders that they needed to rule with better judgment and more sophistication. They must garner support in the countryside, curtail their repression, accommodate local customs, and build ties with district leaders. Taraki and Amin said they would act with more wisdom, but they needed more aid. Brezhnev and Kosygin assured them they would get it. In February 1979, they sent I. V. Arkhipov, a deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, to Kabul to work out the details of a generous aid package that would help build infrastructure, promote modernization, and satisfy consumer needs.

Brezhnev emphasized that his support of the Afghan revolution meant no diminution in his quest for peace. He hoped to deepen détente and expand it to the most populous continent on earth—Asia. Preventing conflict needed to be everybody’s goal, he said, for if war erupted anywhere on the globe it “would be a terrible calamity for all of mankind.”

But in Kabul, Taraki and Amin pursued their own agenda. They continued to act like ruthless thugs, spying on their friends and killing their foes. Aiming to impose a secular, collectivist, centralizing, and modernizing program, they paid little heed to the Islamic sensibilities, local traditions, kinship loyalties, and ethnic ties of their countrymen. In less than a year, insurgencies mounted in many parts of Afghanistan. Islamic fundamentalists of different stripes had already been mobilizing support for more than a decade, first to struggle against Daoud and now, even more fiercely, to rid themselves of the communists in Kabul. They gained inspiration from the success of Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolution in Iran and received assistance from backers in Pakistan. On 15 March 1979, they launched a major insurrection in the city of Herat, near the Iranian border. Taraki and Amin appeared unable to put it down. Their soldiers deserted, their regime was endangered, their revolution imperiled. They appealed to Moscow for help.

Late at night on Saturday, 17 March, the senior Politburo member, A. P. Kirilenko, convened his colleagues for an emergency meeting. Brezhnev was at his dacha, too ill to attend. Kirilenko summarized developments: “Bands of saboteurs and terrorists” had “infiltrated from the territory of Pakistan.” They had been “trained and armed not only with the participation of Pakistani forces but also of China, the United States of America and Iran.” They were committing “atrocities” in Herat. Insurgents from Pakistan and Iran had aligned with domestic counterrevolutionaries who were mostly religious fanatics.

He reported that during the day, a subcommittee—comprised of Gromyko, Ustinov, and Andropov—had worked out a set of recommendations, which now required full Politburo approval. He had talked to Amin earlier in the day and was dumbfounded by his relaxed demeanor, notwithstanding the desertion of infantry and artillery regiments. In Kirilenko’s view, the situation was dire, the need for action imperative.

Gromyko took over the meeting. He made it clear that a major decision loomed. Taraki had appealed for military equipment, ammunition, rations, and ground and air support. “This must be understood to mean that the deployment of our forces is required, both land and air forces.” In grappling with these requests, Gromyko insisted that the Politburo obey a fundamental axiom: “under no circumstances may we lose Afghanistan. For 60 years now we have lived with Afghanistan in peace and friendship. And if we lose Afghanistan now and it turns against the Soviet Union, this will result in a sharp setback to our foreign policy.”

Ustinov and Andropov then presented additional information from mil-
tary advisers and KGB agents inside Afghanistan. About three thousand insur­
gents “are being directed into Afghanistan from Pakistan. These are, in
main part, religious fanatics from among the people.” While the actual situa­
tion was unclear, many ordinary people seemed to be involved in the insur­
rection. Kosygin sensed that Amin and Taraki were hiding the true state of
affairs. Nevertheless, he then summarized the types of economic assistance
and military supplies the Soviet Union could deliver without delay. The
Kremlin, he insisted, must provide everything that was needed, but he won­
dered aloud what would happen if Soviet troops were required. Whom
would they be fighting? “They are all Mohammedans, people of one belief,
and their faith is sufficiently strong that they can close ranks on that basis.”

Kosygin rightly believed that they needed to talk more fully with Taraki
and Amin, ascertain the facts, and persuade them that their own mistakes in
Kabul had contributed to their predicament. “They have continued to exe­
cute people that do not agree with them; they have killed almost all of the
leaders—not only the top leaders, but also those of the middle ranks—of the
Parcham party.”

The men in the Kremlin possessed only a fraction of the information they
needed. Yet they felt impelled to act lest Afghanistan be lost. They blanched,
however, at the idea of deploying troops, preferring to take other steps first:
economic aid, military supplies, advisers, and maybe even a political settle­
ment. If we are talking about deploying forces, said Kirilenko, “the question
must be considered thoroughly.” Kosygin, they decided, should speak to
Taraki and ascertain his will. But Taraki “must be instructed to change his
tactics. Executions, torture and so forth cannot be applied on a massive
scale.” Religious questions and relations with religious communities had to
be worked out.

The Politburo discussion on Saturday night, 17 March, led to a clear ob­
jective but a murky strategy. Toward the end of the meeting, Gromyko said,
“Today the situation in Afghanistan for now is unclear to many of us. Only
one thing is clear—we cannot surrender Afghanistan to the enemy. We have
to think how to achieve this. Maybe we won’t have to introduce troops.”

The next day Kosygin called Taraki, who was clear and insistent. “The sit­
uation is bad and getting worse.” He needed Soviet troops to put down the
insurrection in Herat. The population around Herat was not supporting the
revolution: “It is almost wholly under the influence of Shiite slogans.” We
need your arms, your people, Taraki implored. “It is a very complex matter,”
retorted Kosygin. But complexity was not what Taraki wanted to hear. “Iran
and Pakistan are working against us, according to the same plan,” he ex­
plained. “Hence, if you now launch a decisive attack on Herat, it will be po­
sible to save the revolution.” Kosygin saw problems: “The whole world will
immediately get to know this. The rebels have portable radio transmitters
and will report it directly.”

But Soviet assistance was vital, repeated Taraki. His own troops, including
Afghan officers trained in the Soviet Union, had turned out to be what he
called “Moslem reactionaries.... We are unable to rely on them, we have no
confidence in them.” He wanted Soviet deployments. “We want you to send us
Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmens.... They could drive tanks.... Let them don
Afghan costume and wear Afghan badges and no one will recognize them.”

Again, Kosygin hesitated: “You are, of course, oversimplifying.... a com­
plex political and international issue.” Any Soviet intervention could not be
concealed. “Two hours later the whole world will know about this. Everyone
will begin to shout that the Soviet Union’s intervention in Afghanistan has
begun.” But Kosygin assured Taraki that more consultations would go on in
Moscow. “We are comrades and are waging a common struggle.”

Later that day, 18 March, the Politburo reconvened. Kosygin described
his phone conversation. “Almost without realizing it, Comrade Taraki re­
sponded that almost nobody does support the government.” But Kosygin did
carry the essence of Taraki’s message: “if Herat falls, then the revolution is
doomed.” Defense Minister Ustinov reported on his own conversation with
Amin, who, like Taraki, insisted that the survival of the revolution depended
on Soviet action. Ustinov was frustrated: “What is the problem? Why is this
happening? The problem is that the leadership of Afghanistan did not suffi­
ciently appreciate the role of Islamic fundamentalists. It is under the banner
of Islam that the soldiers are turning against the government, and an absolute
majority, perhaps only with rare exceptions, are believers.”

Andropov interceded, and set the tone of all further discussion:

I have considered all these issues in depth and arrived at the
conclusion that we must consider very, very seriously, the ques­
tion of whose cause we will be supporting if we deploy forces
into Afghanistan. It’s completely clear to us that Afghanistan is
The Soviet Union must not intervene with Soviet bayonets, he insisted. That “is utterly inadmissible. We cannot take such a risk.”

Gromyko strongly agreed. If Soviet troops were used against the Afghan people, the Kremlin would be deemed the aggressor. “All that we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of détente, arms reduction, and much more—all that would be thrown back. China, of course, would be given a nice present. All the nonaligned countries will be against us. In a word serious consequences are to be expected from such an action.” Afghanistan “has not been subject to any aggression,” Gromyko concluded. “This is its internal affair.”

Kirilenko summed up. Yesterday, the Politburo was tempted to intervene. Today “we are all adhering to the position that there is no basis whatsoever for the deployment of forces.” All other possible aid would be forthcoming, but the Soviet Union would not intervene. We must not deploy troops, Ustinov repeated. There “are no plusses for us at all” in doing so, Kosygin agreed. Scores of countries would “come out against us.”

The next day, the Politburo met again, with Brezhnev attending. He put his imprimatur on what his comrades had decided. “The time is not right for us to become entangled in that war [in Afghanistan].” Taraki would be invited to Moscow, and Brezhnev himself would explain the situation to him.

Gromyko recapitulated the most recent events around Herat, which now looked more favorable. Yet vigilance was required: “We may assume with full justification that all these events, not only in Afghanistan but in the neighboring governments, including those in China, are being directed by the hand of the USA,” Gromyko said. “China, Pakistan, and Iran are playing a role here that is not all that far behind.”

But vigilance did not mean junking détente. Too much was at stake. Should the Soviet Union send troops to Afghanistan, declared Gromyko:

We would be largely throwing away everything we achieved with such difficulty, particularly détente, the SALT-II negotia-

Andropov concurred: “To deploy our troops would mean to wage war against the people, to crush the people, to shoot at the people. We will look like aggressors, and we cannot permit that to occur.”

Taraki was summoned to the Kremlin to meet with Kosygin, Gromyko, Ustinov, and Ponomarev. Afterward, Brezhnev saw him. Our friendship is “calculated for [the] ages,” said Kosygin, but Taraki needed to “widen the social support” of his regime and stop alienating the people. Then Kosygin broke the news: “The deployment of our forces in the territory of Afghanistan would immediately arouse the international community and would invite sharply unfavorable multipronged consequences.” Brezhnev reiterated these themes. The main thing, he stressed, “is political work among the masses.” Repression was a “sharp weapon,” he added, and “must be applied extremely cautiously, and only in the case when there are serious legal grounds for it.”

The Vienna Summit

During the winter and spring of 1979, Brezhnev and Carter were both fighting an uphill battle. They were profoundly wary of each other’s moves, and they both struggled with defense officials, military chiefs, intelligence analysts, and personal advisers whose main goal was to ensure that the prospective foe not gain a strategic advantage or first-strike capability. Yet they believed that détente was in their nations’ interests. They shared a similar view: they should contain the arms race, expand the purview of their cooperation, and allow their systems to compete peacefully for the soul of mankind. Each believed his system would prevail.

Brezhnev suspected that the Americans were carrying out a deviously Machiavellian diplomacy. Imperialists did that type of thing. He was angry that the Chinese had attacked Vietnam, Russia’s ally, shortly after the Chinese leaders visited the United States. He warned Carter against colluding with Beijing.
Brezhnev was also aggrieved by Carter's recent trip to the Middle East and his mediation of an Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement that disregarded the Palestinian issue. “What kind of peace is that if more than three million people who have the inalienable right to have a roof over their heads, to have their own...small state, are deprived of that right?” The rest of the Arab world was agitated, and Brezhnev predicted that peace would not come to the Middle East. Worse yet, he chastised Carter for operating “on the sly, bypassing the Soviet Union” in a region of the world that was so close to the U.S.S.R.259

In other letters to the president, Brezhnev complained about American military exercises and the prospective deployment of a new, land-based intercontinental ballistic missile, the MX, which not only carried multiple warheads but could also be launched from mobile vehicles, making it much less vulnerable to a preemptive attack. The construction of new silos for these missiles, said Brezhnev, “would be absolutely incompatible with the corresponding provision of the [SALT] draft treaty.”260

Brezhnev’s military advisers exerted unrelenting pressure on Soviet diplomats and on Brezhnev himself to guard against American efforts to outsmart the Soviet negotiators on the complex technical issues involved in the strategic arms talks, fearing that not even Gromyko and Dobrynin could grasp the details or even the underlying concepts.261 The Soviet general staff originated the responses to U.S. arms control initiatives that were then vetted by experts on two interdepartmental committees in Moscow dominated by high-level officials with a defense mind-set. The foreign ministry was often sidelined and ignored. But the committee members were not indifferent to the benefits of arms control for Soviet self-interest. They wanted to thwart the development of U.S. weapons, such as cruise missiles, and get rid of the U.S. forward base systems in Europe. In return, they knew they had to make reciprocal concessions. But in hammering out policy recommendations, they faced formidable technical and definitional matters, many of which got more complicated as the negotiations advanced. For example, what precisely constituted a “new” missile? What information was essential for verification? To what extent could they encrypt, or scramble, electronic data sent back to earth during test flights? These questions baffled even the best-intentioned officials. The military experts, at least in their view, tried to comply with Brezhnev’s position that the Soviet Union was aiming not for superiority but for parity.

But they saw U.S. proposals “as a direct attempt to destroy the parity which we had just achieved,” said General Detinov.262

Suspensions of this sort were embedded in the psyche of Soviet officials like Brezhnev. How could Americans think that he wanted Soviet military superiority? “I repeat again and again that we do not seek military superiority.” But he believed that the Americans would not take him seriously or respect his sensibilities, interests, and goals unless he, too, could bargain from a position of strength. Strength, however, was always a relative concept, blurred by rapidly evolving concepts of opportunity and threat in a turbulent world.

Brezhnev’s conception of prudent strength made Carter’s life miserable. The president invited Dobrynin to his office on 27 February 1979, and reiterated his hopes for a SALT agreement.264 But Brzezinski and Defense Secretary Brown warned the president that the military balance was tipping in favor of the Soviet Union. “The trend in strategic forces has favored the Soviet Union since the mid-1960s,” Brzezinski wrote Carter a month later. “Since January 1977, however, this trend has become significantly more pronounced.”265 Six weeks later, a net assessment conducted by the Defense Department was even more ominous. After Brown discussed the numbers with the Joint Chiefs and with officials in the State Department, Brzezinski informed the president that the administration could not fulfill its strategic objectives. Given current trends, the United States could not maintain essential equivalence with the Soviet Union or respond effectively to a Warsaw Pact attack or defend the Persian Gulf. “No matter what program decisions we make to modernize our strategic forces, in the early 80’s we are likely to be perceived as having less than essential equivalence with the Soviets.”266

Brzezinski bluntly told Carter that he was seen as weak. “Unfairly, the mass media have stimulated the widespread perception of this Administration as being indecisive in regard to foreign policy issues.”267 This view jeopardized the chances for the SALT treaty to be ratified. Public opinion polls showed that the American people favored SALT but were worried about the Soviet Union’s mounting strength and frustrated by the oil shortages and price hikes. Powerful senators, meanwhile, were lining up against SALT, most notably Henry Jackson. The president’s personal popularity plummeted, with his favorable ratings dropping to 33 percent. Patrick Caddell, his main pollster, was shocked. “Frustration with the President is moving toward personal
hostility," he warned. "This suggests a qualitative change in public attitude that can only be viewed with alarm."

Yet Carter pushed forward, circumspectly to be sure, but forward still. He would not shape his foreign policy by poll numbers. If nothing else, he was dogged, determined, tenacious. Tenacity had enabled him to achieve Senate ratification of the Panama Canal treaty and had paid off in a Middle East breakthrough and an Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement. SALT, he believed, made sense. He would push for it.

Not indifferent to the formidable military machine that the Soviets were putting together, he was determined to keep up. He approved the MX, even though he found it "nauseating" to think about the waste of money. He bowed to JCS and CIA insistence that he demand limits on the Backfire bomber and that he prevent Soviet encryption of data necessary for verification. He knew there would be no Senate ratification of SALT if there were doubts about U.S. capabilities to monitor Soviet compliance.

Nor was he indifferent to Soviet activities in the third world, but he did not think the Kremlin was gaining undue influence there. The United States had normalized relations with China; improved relations with India; preserved good ties with Japan; won a new friend in the Middle East, Egypt; and reconciled differences with its NATO allies. Vietnam and Iran were setbacks, but they were not decisive.

In Carter's view, the United States was not losing the competition with the Kremlin. The Soviet economy was faltering. For the first time since World War II, U.S. growth, despite problems afflicting the American economy, surpassed that of the Soviet Union. "We see every reason to believe that a continued decline in the rate of economic growth of the Soviet Union is inevitable through most of the 1980s," said Admiral Stansfield Turner, director of the CIA. Eventually, the Kremlin would face agonizing choices. "The low growth rates we envision for the mid-1980s could squeeze their resources to the point where something has to give." Turner did not say that excessive Soviet defense spending would change in the short term, but he suggested that it could not be sustained in the long run.

Carter did not believe in American weakness. The United States was much stronger than the Soviet Union, he told Bill Moyers in an interview in late 1978. He wanted cooperation, but he was undaunted by competition so long as it was peaceful. He had as much faith in American values as Brezhnev had in his own. "Our values and our democratic way of life have a magnetic appeal for people all over the world." A "materialistic and a totalitarian philosophy" could never match America's, he said.

When the details on the SALT agreement were finally hammered out by Vance and Dobrynin in May 1979, Carter began preparing carefully for the long-awaited summit conference scheduled to take place in Vienna the next month. Brezhnev's health would be a limiting factor, and Carter was advised not to interrupt the Soviet leader when he read his statements; whether Brezhnev could or would engage in a real conversation after he spoke was unknown. The president's expectations should be modest, Vance cautioned. "Actual negotiations on central issues" were not likely to occur. "He is old, human, and emotional," Harriman told Carter. Yet Brezhnev was not as frail as some people contended, and he would be fully in charge of the Soviet delegation. He would seek to discern the president's motives and he would be influenced by Carter's personal style. The president should deal with him warmly, informally, Harriman advised. Brezhnev was not interested in details. His one consuming preoccupation was to spare his people the agony of another invasion, or worse, a nuclear war.

Carter went to Vienna with conflicting impulses. He knew he had to appear tough lest domestic critics skewer him for his meekness and timidity. He had to be unyielding on the Backfire and on encryption in order to please his intelligence and defense advisers. Yet his overriding goal, as Vance put it, was to establish a rapport with Soviet leaders that would sustain detente after Brezhnev was gone. He "wanted the Soviets to know that the United States was driven by a desire for peace," that he would treat them as equals, that neither nation could achieve nuclear superiority, and that, in his view, the arms race made no sense. He wanted them to know that he was prepared to commence work immediately on SALT III, which must encompass restrictions on intermediate-range missiles in Europe as well as greater reductions in intercontinental missiles. He wanted them to know that if detente was to survive, the Soviet Union had to exercise restraint in Africa and Southeast Asia and recognize that the Persian Gulf was a vital interest to the United States and the Kremlin must not intervene there.

When he met with Brezhnev in Vienna, he conveyed these views cogently and directly, even sharply at times. In contrast, Brezhnev was weak and fragile. His hair was slicked back, his face puffed up. He read his prepared

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268 For the Soul of Mankind

269 The Erosion of Detente, 1973-80

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270 The Erosion of Detente, 1973-80

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271 The Erosion of Detente, 1973-80

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276 The Erosion of Detente, 1973-80
text out loud, and his interpreter, when necessary, picked through his notes and pointed out what else he needed to say. Brezhnev could not discuss anything at length, but he occasionally expressed his strong views. When issues got complicated, Gromyko intervened. The sessions had to be short, not more than two hours. Informal conversation was not easy. Brezhnev could no longer discuss matters late into the night, as he had with Nixon and Ford. Dinners could not be delayed. He retired early. He was an old man who took offense easily. He complained that the menu for the meal at the U.S. embassy had been printed only in English. The Soviets were more sensitive, he said, printing their menus in English as well as Russian. But sick and old as he was, the Americans could not mistake that Brezhnev’s colleagues still deferred to him.276

Brezhnev emphasized to the Americans that the Kremlin might support national liberation movements but did not foment them. It was simply a “fairy tale” to think Moscow could orchestrate these movements. They were inscribed in the fabric of history. Nor did the Soviet Union seek military supremacy. As chairman of the Defense Council, Brezhnev told Carter, he could say with certainty that the Soviet Union did not want war, any war. The Kremlin rejected the first use of nuclear or conventional weapons. Détente, Brezhnev emphasized, must rest on the principles of equal security, respect for each other’s legitimate interests, and noninterference in internal affairs—nothing more, nothing less. He did not understand why the Americans were launching a rearmament program. He objected to the modernization of NATO’s forces and to the retention of American forward-based nuclear systems in Europe. The president might dwell on an arc of crisis stretching from southwest Asia through the Persian Gulf and the Middle East to East Africa, but Brezhnev wanted Carter to understand that Europe was of primary importance to the U.S.S.R. “It was the chief concern of the Soviet leadership that neither the Soviet people nor any other people in Europe ever live as a result of the Hitlerite aggression,” he whispered to his comrades.282

These largely predictable exchanges were carefully scripted. Brezhnev and Carter did not deviate significantly from any position that their diplomats had been presenting for the prior two years. The state of play between the two governments was vividly illuminated when Secretary of Defense Brown and his Soviet counterpart, Marshal Ustinov, met in a special session to try to break the long-standing deadlock in negotiations on the reduction of conventional troops in the heart of Europe, the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) negotiations. Brezhnev and Gromyko had given Ustinov a set of concessions to put on the table, but when Brown and Ustinov started talking they arrived at the same impasse where their subordinates had been stuck for years. Brown insisted that the Soviets either clarify their data regarding existing force structures or accept the U.S. numbers. Ustinov said that he had no obligation to examine the disputed data but wanted to discuss force reductions. He then conveyed the Kremlin’s new position. The Soviet Union “is offering to reduce twice as many troops as the U.S. side,” emphasized Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, Ustinov’s associate. Brown was not impressed. He wanted data. The frustration of Soviet officials was palpable. Ogarkov snapped, “You are military people. Be specific. Make a proposal.” Brown would not budge. The American people seem to be “interested in the balance of forces,” commented Ustinov, “the Soviet people . . . in the relaxation of tensions.” They got nowhere.278

As the heads of state of the two most powerful nations on earth, Carter and Brezhnev shared a special burden that no one else could really appreciate. Each wanted the other to know that he had a unique responsibility to control the arms race, avoid nuclear war, and sustain détente. Carter went out of his way in the first session to “salute” Brezhnev “for initiating the concept of détente.”279 And Brezhnev made his personal attitudes clear. Before the negotiating sessions began, the two paid their respects to the president of Austria, and as they left his office they exchanged a few personal words. Brezhnev put his hand on the president’s shoulder and said, “If we do not succeed, God will not forgive us.” Carter was touched. “As we walked down a few steps to leave the building,” he remembered later, “Brezhnev kept his hand on my arm or shoulder to steady himself. This simple and apparently natural gesture bridged the gap between us more effectively than any official talk.”280

At the conference table, Brezhnev repeated the official Soviet position on almost every issue but made it clear that détente meant a great deal to him personally. He said he did not like it when U.S. officials called the Soviet Union an adversary. American and Soviet values might compete, but his own purpose was to expand cooperation.281 At the closing ceremony, he hugged Carter, a gesture that had not been scripted. Carter was “quite a nice guy, after all,” he whispered to his comrades.282
Carter sensed Brezhnev’s warmth even while he felt the heat of his domestic critics. Hamilton Jordan, Carter’s most intimate political adviser, warned Ambassador Dobrynin that Carter must avoid “looking like a leader who flung himself carelessly into the embrace of the Russians.” But the president thought he had established a good rapport with Brezhnev, that he understood him. After Vienna, he recalled, “there were strong feelings of cooperation between us.” He gave Brezhnev a handwritten note: “I look forward . . . to our next meeting, when we will be able to build on this new foundation which we have established.”

Back in the United States, Carter delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress. Failure to ratify SALT, he warned, would intensify the strategic arms race, impose huge burdens on the U.S. budget, increase the danger of nuclear proliferation, and accentuate tensions between East and West. The treaty was not a panacea to all the world’s problems, Carter acknowledged. It “will not end the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. That competition is based on fundamentally different visions of human society and human destiny,” but SALT regulated the competition and channeled it in peaceful directions, much to America’s advantage. “The ultimate future of the human race lies not with tyranny, but with freedom,” Carter assured Congress, “not with war, but with peace.” With SALT ratified and the Cold War reconfigured, the American people could shift their focus to domestic priorities, such as the energy crisis.

Turbulence abroad undercut the president’s plans. Just days before Carter had gone to Vienna, Brzezinski told him that Central America “now demands our highest attention.” There was increasing violence and political polarization throughout the area. The Alliance for Progress that Democratic administrations had touted in the 1960s had not made a dent in the region’s poverty; nor had it ended U.S. military assistance to numerous right-wing authoritarian leaders and murderous despots. In Nicaragua, “Communist guerillas could seize power,” Brzezinski now warned Carter. He was alluding to the Sandinista National Liberation Front, which had been struggling to overthrow the dictatorship of President Anastasio Somoza Debayle, whom the United States had long supported. At a meeting of top U.S. officials on 11 June, Frank Carlucci, deputy director of the CIA, reported that Somoza would not last out his term, which would expire in 1981. Businessmen, clergymen, and liberal reformers wanted to get rid of him, as did many impoverished peasants, rural workers, students, and urban laborers, who rallied behind the Sandinista movement. The moderate center “is being chewed up,” said Carlucci. “The left is much stronger than before.” And Cuba’s involvement was escalating.

By the time Carter returned from Vienna, the worrisome situation in Nicaragua had become an acute crisis. For two years, he had been trying to...
throw U.S. support behind the moderate center, seeking to champion human rights without risking a radical takeover. But now his options were narrowing. On 23 June, Brzezinski said he faced a grave decision in Nicaragua: “either a Castroist Sandinista victory” or a “US military intervention.” The latter would “destroy the credibility” of U.S. policies toward the third world and provoke “universal condemnation.”287

Brzezinski did not believe Somoza would last another week, but he, Vance, Brown, and Turner still tried to design viable options to stop the Sandinistas from gaining power.288 Their efforts failed. By the time Carter’s diplomats arranged for Somoza to step down in mid-July 1979, the Sandinistas were in control of a coalition government. More pressing issues now arose. Robert A. Pastor, the Latin American expert on Brzezinski’s staff, starkly outlined them: “how can we keep Nicaragua from becoming another Cuba, and how can we keep the rest of Central America from becoming another Nicaragua?”289

Secretary of Defense Brown highlighted these concerns to the president. The administration must consider “what we might do to prevent the destabilization of neighboring countries, especially El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.” If the Sandinistas consolidated their power in Nicaragua and followed a Marxist-Leninist course, leftist forces in neighboring countries would be emboldened and the rightists would be terrified. More civil strife would ensue, and America’s vulnerability would grow. Brown recommended that the administration relax its support for human rights and back moderate military leaders in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.290

Pastor objected. Brown’s arguments, Pastor wrote Brzezinski, rested “on a weak and perhaps erroneous premise: that U.S. support is necessary and sufficient to stabilize these regimes.” He emphasized that the crisis in Central America stemmed from the “increasingly widespread alienation of the people of Central America from their governments; we are witnessing the wholesale delegitimization of narrow-based military governments.” The United States needed to promote elections, human rights, and reforms, he insisted, and different options must be tried in different countries “until we find the one that works.” The United States must not become discouraged and withdraw. “And we need to counter everything the Cubans do.”291

On 20 July, the National Security Council met to discuss the crisis in Cent-
President Carter now was very clear about his overriding priority: The United States must deal with the energy crisis. It must cut its consumption of foreign oil and boost its production of alternative energy sources. The American people must overcome drift, stagnation, and paralysis, and regain their self-confidence by tackling their most difficult challenge. If they needed a more streamlined, focused, and disciplined leadership, Carter would provide it. He soon outlined a number of changes in his cabinet and staff. But he did not blame the country's angst on foreign foes or hostile ideologies, nor hold his national security team responsible for the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua or the Islamic upheaval in Iran. Ferment, he knew, was sewn into the seams of the international system.

His equanimity in the face of growing turbulence abroad stirred the passions of political adversaries and animated the concerns of his national security advisers. The administration, Brzezinski warned Carter on 27 July, would be foolish to ignore Cuba's growing subversive activities, which were becoming a political issue inside the United States. “Castro’s successes abroad, and Soviet sponsorship of his activities, now confront us with an increasingly difficult foreign policy problem.”

Brzezinski wanted more information on Soviet military deliveries to Cuba and on Cuban activities in Central America and Africa, which he was sure were provocative. “Whether Cuba is acting as a Soviet surrogate, partner or (in my view least likely) simply dragging the USSR along, the result is clear: Castro’s foreign activities have well served Soviet interests and created far-reaching problems for us—not the least of which has been a crisis of confidence among our friends (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Sudan, several Latin American governments) as to whether we can or will counter Cuban/Soviet interventionism.” The United States had to make it clear by deeds as well as words “that we hold the Soviet Union accountable for Cuba’s intensified activity. The Soviets otherwise have an absolutely cost-free and risk-free device for increasing our difficulties.”

Brzezinski launched a ferocious private campaign to get Carter to toughen up. He wanted the president to consider why his administration got so little credit for genuine foreign-policy accomplishments, why “public opinion in the world at large, notably in allied countries, [views] this Administration as perhaps the most timid since World War II.” Everywhere, the Soviet Union was seen as “assertive” and the United States as “acquiescent,” he wrote. And now much of the world “is watching to see how we will behave on the Soviet/Cuban issue.” In Latin America, “revolutionary fervor is on the rise, and we have not been able to give those who want to rely on us a sense of security.” People at home and abroad were waiting to see Carter exercise effective leadership. The country “craves, and our national security needs, both a more assertive tone and [a] more assertive substance to our foreign administration, who feared that a news story about its existence would jeopardize Senate ratification of the SALT II agreement. Vance and Under Secretary of State David Newsom learned that the news had already been leaked and would appear in the press. They contacted interested senators, such as the Democrat Frank Church, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Richard Stone, a Democrat from Florida, hoping to modulate congressional and public reaction to the worrying report. News of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba would be seen as another sign not only of Soviet audacity but also of Soviet mendacity, Vance said, a violation of the promise Khrushchev had made to Kennedy in 1962 to remove offensive Soviet military capabilities from the Caribbean island.

Notwithstanding Vance’s hopes, senators Church and Stone used the information to boost their popularity in their home states rather than support the administration’s battle for SALT ratification. Facing a very tough reelection campaign and ridiculed by right-wingers for his dovish positions, Church inflamed the situation by saying that SALT hearings could not continue until the Soviet Union allayed U.S. concerns about Cuba. On Labor Day weekend, the story was plastered on the front pages of the country’s newspapers. Carter’s opponents gleefully used it to revive their charges of presidential meekness and U.S. weakness. Vance had to spend a month seeking clarification from the Kremlin, and Carter a month figuring out how to handle the matter. Did the brigade amount to a significant threat? Did it constitute a breach of previous Soviet commitments? Should SALT be sandbagged?

Once U.S. intelligence homed in on Cuba, it illuminated something ominous there—a “combat brigade” of Soviet soldiers. Information about this brigade was quickly disseminated among high-level officials in the Carter administration, who feared that a news story about its existence would jeopardize Senate ratification of the SALT II agreement. Vance and Under Secretary of State David Newsom learned that the news had already been leaked and would appear in the press. They contacted interested senators, such as the Democrat Frank Church, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Richard Stone, a Democrat from Florida, hoping to modulate congressional and public reaction to the worrying report. News of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba would be seen as another sign not only of Soviet audacity but also of Soviet mendacity, Vance said, a violation of the promise Khrushchev had made to Kennedy in 1962 to remove offensive Soviet military capabilities from the Caribbean island.
policy,” Brzezinski insisted. He listed options, including sending Defense Secretary Brown to China to discuss technology transfer and arms sales, maximizing Cuban economic problems, and accelerating U.S. broadcasts to Soviet national minorities, especially Ukrainians and Muslims.299

Carter’s national security adviser did not want a confrontation over the Soviet brigade in Cuba. From the start, Brzezinski sensed this was a phony issue, more important for its domestic political fallout than for its actual military implications. But he insisted that Carter exploit the opportunity to demonstrate strength and impress his political foes at home, including Senator Ted Kennedy, who was preparing to run against Carter for the Democratic nomination. I know it will “irritate you” to read this, Brzezinski wrote Carter, but it was necessary to build up U.S. defenses, work on a rapid-deployment force, and convey a real determination to use force when necessary. The French had a saying, the cosmopolitan Brzezinski wrote his provincial boss, “c'est le ton qui fait la chanson (it’s the tone that makes the song).”300

Irritate the president he did, but he did not convince him. Brzezinski assailed the incompetence of the State Department, but Carter nonetheless followed the course advised by Vance, and throughout September, Vance demanded that the intelligence agencies review their previous data regarding Soviet troops in Cuba. As they did, it became increasingly clear that Soviet ground forces had been in Cuba for years, probably since 1962, and that previous Democratic and Republican administrations had simply accepted their presence without alarm. No “combat brigade” had recently been inserted; there was no new threat.301 But a month of adverse publicity about this boded ill for Senate ratification of SALT II.

In a speech to the American people on 1 October, Carter acknowledged that the brigade issue “was not a simple or easy subject.” It was a “serious matter” that had to be put in larger perspective. The important philosophical differences between the Soviet Union and the United States had to be recognized, and while competition between the two would continue, the need for cooperation on matters of mutual interest, such as controlling the arms race, trumped other concerns. The Kremlin had provided appropriate assurances that its ground forces in Cuba would not be increased or its mission, which was solely to train the Cuban armed forces, altered. This was good news, but Carter announced he was taking measures of his own, creating a joint Caribbean task force with military headquarters in Key West to monitor the situation and, if necessary, take swift action. He would authorize military exercises to be conducted in the Caribbean; provide additional economic assistance to the Caribbean region to help “troubled peoples . . . resist social turmoil and possible communist domination”; reinforce the U.S. naval presence in the Indian Ocean; and augment the capabilities of America’s rapid-deployment forces.

But Carter’s major point was that the brigade issue was certainly no reason for a return to the Cold War. “A confrontation might be emotionally satisfying for a few days or weeks for some people, but it would be destructive to the national interest and to the security of the United States.” Toward the end of his speech, he emphasized, “We must not play politics with the security of the United States[,] . . . with the survival of the human race[,] . . . with SALT II. It is much too important for that—too vital to our country, to our allies, and to the cause of peace.”302

In a world brewing with danger, Carter remained steadfast. He did not ignore the many warnings of Soviet military aggrandizement, but he refused to be alarmed by them. He would spend more on defense, deploy the MX missile, and configure a force for missions in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. He would send Defense Secretary Brown to China to signal the further evolution of a new strategic orientation and would ask his NATO allies to accept a new generation of nuclear weapons, including cruise missiles and Pershing IIIs. But he would not lose sight of détente or abandon SALT II.

He was delighted when he met the new Pope. Imbued with a hatred of communism and a love of God, the former cardinal of Krakow Karol Wojtyla was an omen of the times. In the struggle for the soul of mankind, the president and the Pope knew that atheistic communism could not meet the yearnings of people seeking meaning, fulfillment, and opportunity. “The Soviets subjugate the rights of an individual human being to the rights of the state,” Carter told a news conference on 9 October. “We do just the opposite. The Soviets are an atheistic nation; we have deep and fundamental religious beliefs. . . . So, I don’t have any fear or any trepidation” about competing with the Soviets peacefully.303

Carter was well aware of the increasing ferment in Eastern Europe, notably in Poland. Developments there, Brzezinski informed him, represented “a significant change in the Soviet world and a sign of decreasing Soviet control.” Despite its formidable military capabilities, the Soviet Union was
internally weak and bureaucratically stagnant, and it was experiencing a "dramatic drop in its ideological appeal." These weaknesses could be capitalized on, argued Brzezinski, and with shrewd policies, the United States might be able to drive a wedge between the Kremlin and some of its satellites.304

Hard times inside the Soviet Union made it a propitious moment to "aggravate ethnic conflict," "erode the authority of the party, and raise questions about the efficacy of the Soviet economic system," the CIA reported. According to U.S. intelligence analysts, Marxist-Leninist ideology was "waning as a force capable of mobilizing the population to make personal sacrifices for the sake of loftier social goals."305

But "malaise" also afflicted Western societies. Carter's willingness to dwell on this reality elicited nothing but scorn from his many critics, who blamed him for the malaise.306 His approval ratings continued to be dismal, hovering around 30 percent. The pollster Patrick Caddell warned him that he was significantly trailing Ted Kennedy in the polls. While Americans admired his character, Caddell said, they deplored his leadership. "People make the judgment everyday ... that events dominate us, that we react to, not lead events." Unless Carter demonstrated more boldness and exercised more leadership, he would lose the next election. "I implore you to take action," Caddell wrote.307

Just as Caddell was finishing his analysis, events in Iran took a dramatic turn for the worse. For months, the Iranian revolution had been following a more radical Islamic course, and invective against America had soared. Revolutionary leaders warned Washington not to allow the exiled and now dying Shah to enter the United States for medical treatment, but Carter finally assented to pleas from the Shah's many influential friends. Iranians were incensed. On 1 November, more than two million demonstrators marched through the streets of Tehran shouting, "Death to America!" Three days later, young Islamic radicals seized the U.S. embassy, and Ayatollah Khomeini did nothing to stop them. The days and weeks passed, but the fifty-two hostages were not freed. America's impotency and Carter's weakness became ever more glaring. Hamilton Jordan, now serving as the president's chief of staff, wrote to him, "The American people are frustrated at our country's inability to do anything to free the prisoners and retaliate in a fashion that makes us feel better about ourselves."308

Carter grasped "the gravity of the situation" and appealed to the Iranian government to free the hostages. He froze Iranian assets in the United States and suspended the importation of Iranian oil. The United States, he said, "will never allow any foreign country to dictate any American policy," and he warned that "grave consequences" would ensue if the hostages were harmed. When he heard that the Ayatollah might put Americans on trial for spying, he grew angry. He assailed the Islamic fundamentalists who ruled Tehran:

The actions of Iran have shocked the civilized world. For a government to applaud mob violence and terrorism, for a government actually to support and, in effect, participate in the taking and the holding of hostages is unprecedented in human history. This violates not only the most fundamental precepts of international law but also the common ethical and religious heritage of humanity. There is no recognized religious faith on earth which condones kidnapping. There is no recognized religious faith on Earth which condones blackmail.309

The hostage crisis highlighted U.S. vulnerabilities.
The American people rallied behind their president but yearned for bolder leadership. Hamilton Jordan was taken aback when his twelve-year-old nephew told him that his "friends at school say that Jimmy Carter doesn't have the guts to do anything." Carter knew what people were thinking. If "I asked the people of Plains [his hometown] what I should do, every last one of them would say, 'Bomb Iran!'"

Yet Carter appealed for calm. He asked Americans not to mistreat Iranians residing in the United States and to reduce oil consumption. When taunted at a news conference—Khomeini "doesn't believe you have the guts to use military force"—Carter responded with restraint. All options were open, he said, but he preferred to resolve the crisis peacefully. Americans had learned in Vietnam, he said on 13 December, "that to become unnecessarily involved in the internal affairs of another country when our own security is not directly threatened is a serious mistake." But he did not rule out the use of force.

Brzezinski and Brown prodded him to explore military options. Brzezinski was not so worried about the hostages as about the erosion of America's position in the Persian Gulf. "I recommended a number of steps designed to enhance our security presence in the region and to place greater pressure on Iran, including the possibility of assisting efforts to unseat Khomeini." On the bottom of one of Brzezinski's memos, Carter wrote that his advisers should consider everything "that Khomeini would not want to see occur and which would not incite condemnation of U.S. by other nations." But he did not rule out the use of force.

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The president was sorely tempted to take action, yet he was a man of tenacious self-discipline, and he wanted détente to survive. He held his fire and waited. He was still hoping to welcome Brezhnev to Washington after SALT II was ratified.

Carter expected the Kremlin to share his priorities and show equal self-restraint. He was wrong. Brezhnev and his colleagues were eager to capitalize on America's distress both in Central America and in the Persian Gulf. Brezhnev sent a telegram to the new Sandinista government in Managua congratulating the leadership on its heroic victory. On 8 August, an Aeroflot IL-76 landed in Nicaragua with medical supplies and baby food donated by Soviet trade unions. In an emblematic speech on 18 September, Mikhail Suslov, the Kremlin's leading ideologue, endorsed SALT, embraced peace, and heralded the "defeat of imperialist and neocolonialist forces" in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Kampuchea, and Nicaragua. "In the midst of the complex processes of world development one can distinctly see the chief trend of the modern era—the growth of [socialism] . . . and the steady development of revolutionary processes in the world." But decolonization, revolutionary nationalism, and capitalist disorder bred danger as well as opportunity. Vigilance was a hallmark of Marxism-Leninism, and Soviet leaders never ceased reminding one another that they must be vigilant. The insurgency in Afghanistan made them wary. The truculence, incompetence, and undependability of their new comrades in Kabul heightened their sense of threat. Moreover, political Islam might become a contagion. On 12 June 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini told the Soviet ambassador in Tehran, "We hope that Afghanistan, which is an Islamic country, will solve its problems through Islamic means. Soviet interference there will have an effect on Iran. We demand that the USSR should not interfere in Afghanistan." The Kremlin did not want to intervene militarily. Brezhnev assigned responsibility to a committee of the Politburo composed of Gromyko, Ustinov, Andropov, and Ponomarev. Their reports endorsed military assistance and economic aid, and called for more Soviet advisers to work with the Afghan army and for more Soviet experts to staff the Afghan government ministries. But they knew that success depended on the Kabul government's willingness to widen its political base, distribute land, and foster economic growth. The Kremlin wanted Taraki and Amin to institute reforms and stop their murderous actions. Soviet officials called for more "law and order, based on revolutionary legality." Repressive measures must be constrained. "A person's fate should not be decided on the basis of circumstantial and unverifiable evidence." The Muslim clergy should be handled adroitly. Their "influence could be diminished by encouraging religious freedom and demonstrating that the new power does not persecute the clergy as a class, but only punishes those who act against the revolutionary system." But Taraki and Amin continued to want more than economic aid and military assistance from the U.S.S.R. In repeated meetings with Soviet officials, they requested paratroop divisions and combat units because, they said, Iran and Pakistan as well as Saudi Arabia, China, and the United States were supporting the insurrectionists. Soviet officials declined. They did not think that the risks were worth the sacrifices or that Taraki and Amin merited such
bold measures. The problems of the Afghan government, concluded Andropov, Ustinov, Gromyko, and Ponomarev, were only "becoming more intense" because of the abuses committed by its leaders. "In the Party and the government a collegial leadership is lacking, all power in fact is concentrated in the hands of N. M. Taraki and H. Amin, who none too rarely make mistakes and commit violations of legality."\footnote{321}

In late August 1979, Kremlin officials decided that Amin had to be removed from power. He was conspiring against Taraki and behaving treacherously. KGB officers in Kabul had tired of dealing with him. He was regarded as the person most responsible for repressing the people and employing military means to tackle problems that were essentially political, economic, and social.\footnote{322} On his way to a conference of heads of state of "non-aligned" nations in Havana in September, and on his way back to Kabul, Taraki stopped in Moscow and talked to Kremlin leaders. On 10 September, Brezhnev read to him from notes prepared by the KGB and approved by Andropov, Ustinov, Gromyko, and Ponomarev. "The concentration of excessive power in the hands of others, even your closest aides, could be dangerous to the fate of the revolution," said Brezhnev. As he continued, the message became unmistakably clear: Taraki must get rid of Amin.\footnote{323}

An elaborate plot was concocted in the Kremlin. Upon his arrival in Kabul, Taraki and a number of co-conspirators tried to carry it out. It backfired. Amin survived, took Taraki prisoner, and killed him.\footnote{324}

Leaders in the Kremlin then made a fateful decision: to work with Amin, though they knew he lusted for power and dealt ruthlessly with his foes. "We are not pleased by all of Amin's methods and actions," Brezhnev admitted. He was "very power-driven" and exhibited "disproportionate harshness." But one could not "ignore the currently existing situation." Soviet officials explained to their comrades in East Germany that they hoped they could control Amin's excesses. They wanted him to collaborate with "real revolutionaries" in Afghanistan whose dedication to Marxism-Leninism could not be questioned. Meanwhile, they would watch him carefully, "observing whether he is keeping his promises."\footnote{325}

But Amin was impossible to deal with. He repeatedly asked the Kremlin for more aid. Soviet officials could not control him and did not trust him. On 29 October, Andropov, Ustinov, Gromyko, and Ponomarev issued another report to Brezhnev expressing their disaffection, but acknowledging that they were not yet ready to give up on him. Amin's oppression had widened. His "actions are provoking growing unrest among progressive forces." His attitudes and actions toward the Soviet Union "ever more distinctly expose his insincerity and duplicity." Outwardly he feigned agreement with the Kremlin but in practice he fomented anti-Soviet sentiments. Worse, he was beginning to make overtures to the United States. But the Soviets still had leverage over him and would try to exert it, for their fundamental premise "was not to allow the victory of counter-revolution."\footnote{326}

The specter of defeat hovered ever more ominously with each passing week, however. Soviet military advisers and KGB operators in Afghanistan were producing meager results. Andropov and Ustinov grew warier and more agitated. On 2 December, Andropov sent a handwritten note to Brezhnev: "we have been receiving information about Amin's behind-the-scenes activities which might mean his political reorientation to the West."\footnote{327} Afghanistan's April revolution was endangered; Soviet security was endangered.

A few days later a key meeting took place in the Walnut Room of the Kremlin, attended by Andropov, Ustinov, Gromyko, and Suslov. They saw danger. They discussed the absence of effective air defenses along the southern border of the Soviet Union, explored the implications of having Pershing II missiles in Afghanistan, should the United States gain a foothold there, and speculated about the prospective use of Afghan uranium by Iran or Pakistan. Aware of the ethnic rivalries in the region, they ruminated about the fragmentation of Afghanistan and the expansion of Pakistan. They even talked about alleged American plans to create a "New Great Ottoman Empire" that would absorb the southern republics of the U.S.S.R.\footnote{328} "We were concerned," recalled Valentin Varennikov, who then headed operational planning in the General Staff, "that if the United States were forced from Iran, they would move their bases to Pakistan and grab Afghanistan.... We thought that they would try to put intelligence centers in the north of Afghanistan."\footnote{329}

Brezhnev's closest advisers concluded that they had to get rid of Amin. They planned to replace him with Babrak Karmal, who would be more reliable and more responsive to their concerns and interests, but they knew Karmal would need help to consolidate power and establish order. Reluctantly, they agreed that, if necessary, they would deploy combat troops to assist him. Ustinov, Andropov, and their colleagues did not contemplate a prolonged in-
tervention or a protracted war. Their troops would ensure an orderly transition after a bloody coup. Karmal would institute the reforms they had long envisioned. Order would return. The troops would then leave. “Do not worry, Anatoly,” Brezhnev said to Dobrynin, “we will end this war in three or four weeks.”

Ustinov’s top generals advised against intervention. They feared a protracted guerrilla war that would sap the Soviet army’s morale and erode its strength. Marshal Ogarkov, chief of the General Staff, attended a meeting of top decision makers on 10 December. Intervention, he exclaimed, would unite all Muslims against the Soviet Union and embarrass the Kremlin in the eyes of the world. Andropov cut him off and told him to stick to military affairs. Ogarkov persisted, but his was a lone voice. Chernenko, Suslov, Ustinov, and Kirilenko would not listen. Andropov, Brezhnev said, should be supported.

Preparations began for the deployment of troops, the removal of Amin, and the installation of Karmal. But the decision makers were uneasy. Andropov was tenser than his doctor had ever seen him. Brezhnev was angry, feeling that Amin had betrayed Moscow’s friendship. When the final decision was made on 12 December, Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko were its key proponents; Brezhnev, in a quivering hand, signed the directive to send in combat troops. Dissenters, such as Kosygin, did not attend the final meeting. After months of hesitation, equivocation, uncertainty, and anxiety, the fateful decision was made. Afghanistan “must not be given to the Americans,” said Brezhnev’s closest aide, Andrei Aleksandrov-Agentov.

When they made their decision to intervene in Afghanistan, Soviet leaders saw threat, not opportunity. Imperialists could not be trusted. The United States and its NATO allies had just resolved to deploy new nuclear forces in Europe. This decision, in the Kremlin’s view, jeopardized the principle of equal security on which détente was premised. Brezhnev had warned against another escalation of the arms race and even offered to reduce the number of Soviet SS-20s if the West would talk and not act. But NATO leaders moved ahead on 12 December, saying they were willing to talk but would not stop their plans to deploy 464 ground-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles in Western Europe and 108 Pershing II intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Brezhnev and his colleagues were dismayed. The Americans were again seeking to negotiate from strength. Washington lusted for first-strike capabilities in order to blackmail the Soviet Union. “After the [NATO] decision to station medium-range missiles in Europe,” Soviet leaders concluded, “there was nothing to lose.” Feeling vulnerable, Brezhnev and his colleagues decided to take no chances in Afghanistan.

The Soviets also expected the United States to intervene in Iran. They could not imagine that a great power would allow its diplomats to be held captive for long. Gromyko warned the Americans not to use force on the Soviet periphery. They should stay composed, act calmly, and keep their emotions from boiling over. Dobrynin went to see Brzezinski: “We could not remain indifferent if the United States interfered militarily in our southern neighbor,” he said. But the Kremlin still thought Carter “would do something.”

Turbulence in Iran was portentous. Ayatollah Khomeini hated communists only slightly less than he did Americans. “There were two Satans,” remembered the chief KGB agent in Tehran, “the greater one was the United States, the lesser one was the Soviet Union.” The Soviets continued to worry that Islamic fervor would spill over into Afghanistan, where its consequences could not be predicted, especially when Amin could not be trusted. The Americans could end up lodging themselves on Soviet frontiers.

Brezhnev was discouraged. His own body was failing him, and his colleagues were disappointing him. He trusted the party cadres to do their job, but they were underperforming. Sick as he was, he grasped the dismal realities. On 27 November, he addressed the plenum of the party’s Central Committee. Ritually, he summarized the achievements of the most recent five-year plan but then he launched into a long critique. There were bottlenecks and shortages, inefficiencies and incompetence. Vast sums were being invested, “and yet the final result which we obtain is smaller than it should be, and smaller than our possibilities permit.” More attention must be focused on transportation, fuel, power, and metallurgy. But Brezhnev was especially distressed by the party’s inability to satisfy the basic needs of Soviet citizens. Complaints were pouring in about shortages of medicines, soap, washing powders, toothbrushes, toothpaste, needles, thread, and so on. “This, comrades, is inexcusable.” In designing the next five-year plan, Brezhnev told party officials, they had to be more creative and more disciplined. They must satisfy “growing public demands.” Those who could not perform adequately, he warned, would lose their jobs. Mismanagement could not be tolerated.
The “centralism we need is democratic centralism, which opens a wide vista for initiative from below.”

Brezhnev's body was weak, but his mind was not fuzzy when he sent the combat troops to Afghanistan. His system was underperforming at home and facing danger abroad. Détente, if it worked, would enable Soviet leaders to address their domestic problems more easily. The arms race, they knew, “swallows up the most colossal resources, undermines healthy economic development and places a heavy burden on the shoulders of hundreds of millions of people.” But domestic needs could not trump security concerns. Vigilance against external foes was the lesson that Brezhnev's generation could never forget. It constituted the heart of their ideology and the core of their experience.

Shortly before approving the deployment of troops to Afghanistan, Brezhnev shared his frustrations and fears with Erich Honecker. Washington and Bonn were playing a “dangerous game,” Brezhnev said to him. Their plan to deploy a new generation of intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe was “a severe blow to détente.” Worse, it was now unlikely that SALT II would be ratified, since the hysteria over the alleged Soviet brigade in Cuba had practically killed its chances. The Americans wanted “to blackmail” the Kremlin, hoping to “coerce concessions.” They also wanted to play their “Chinese card,” encouraging Beijing to attack Soviet allies in Indochina. We must “watch out,” Brezhnev stressed.

Gloomy and sick, determined and resentful, Brezhnev made his fateful decision. As Christmas 1979 dawned in the West, détente faded.

The End of Détente

Leonid Brezhnev killed détente with the United States, the policy he had helped to launch a decade before. And while he agonized about the decision, Jimmy Carter did not agonize about his reaction to Brezhnev's move. This “is deliberate aggression that calls into question détente and the way we have been doing business with the Soviets for the past decade,” he told Hamilton Jordan over the phone. “It raises grave questions about Soviet intentions and destroys any chance of getting the SALT Treaty through the Senate. And that makes the prospects of nuclear war even greater.”

In his letter to Brezhnev on 28 December Carter did not mince words. Soviet actions were a clear threat to the peace, violated the principles of détente, and flouted “all the accepted norms of international conduct.” Military intervention in a nonaligned nation “represents an unsettling, dangerous and new stage in your use of military forces. . . . Unless you draw back from your present course of action, this will inevitably jeopardize the course of U.S.-Soviet relations throughout the world.”

Brezhnev shamelessly defended Soviet actions. Moscow, he said, was answering the requests of the Afghan government, and the intervention had but one purpose: to help Afghanistan defend itself against external aggression. Soviet troops would not stay long, Brezhnev assured Carter. Meanwhile, he advised the president to be calmer. The “immoderate tone” of the American message had “hit us squarely between the eyes.” The previous work together should not be in vain. The U.S.S.R. did not want to abandon détente and hoped the United States would see its continued advantages.

But for Carter, there was no more temporizing. As long as Soviet troops were in Afghanistan, détente was dead. He recalled the U.S. ambassador from Moscow and reduced diplomatic contacts. He asked the Senate to suspend consideration of SALT II. He cut trade, stopped the sale of high-technology items, imposed an embargo on grain sales, and limited Soviet fishing rights off U.S. shores. American athletes, he said, would not participate in the summer Olympic games to be held in Moscow in 1980. He boosted defense appropriations and accelerated the development of a rapid-deployment force. He beefed up military assistance to Pakistan and encouraged Saudi aid to that country.

In a series of interviews, statements, and speeches, Carter explained his thinking, motives, and fears. “The last 2 months have not been happy days for our Nation. . . . No one knows the ultimate outcome of these challenges.” The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War. Soviet troops in Afghanistan were in striking distance of the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Hormuz. They could gain control of the petroleum resources of the Persian Gulf and Middle East, the source of more than two-thirds of the world’s exportable oil. Soviet actions, therefore, constituted “a threat to an area of the world where the interests of our country and those interests of our allies are deeply imbedded.” The U.S. position must be absolutely clear, Carter told the American people. “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will
be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." The Carter Doctrine was born, containment revived, and the Cold War resurrected.348

"The 1980s have been born in turmoil, strife and change," Carter stated.349 Opportunities for Soviet expansion abounded; threats to American interests and values were indisputable and incalculable. Fritz Ermath, the Soviet expert on Brzezinski's staff, vividly summed up the sense of danger:

The invasion sharply increases the prospect of eventual Soviet military domination of the greater Middle East and US exclusion from the region, except perhaps from Israel. Next we shall very probably see civil strife in Iran with direct Soviet involvement, a [communist] PDRY take-over of North Yemen, increased Soviet efforts to destabilize Turkey and Pakistan, and intense Soviet pressure on other states in the region to line up with Soviet interests.350

The American assessment of Soviet motivations was as flawed as the Soviet perception of danger. When Ambassador Dobrynin returned to Washington from Moscow after the Soviet invasion, Vance asked him earnestly: Are Soviet troops going to move into Pakistan or Iran? For Dobrynin, the question was preposterous. Nobody in the Politburo was even thinking of deploying troops to those countries. Far from possessing a grand design of his own, Brezhnev in fact had queried Dobrynin, "Where is the 'Arc of Crisis,'" where is that region of the world that Brzezinski claimed was the target of Kremlin designs?351 The Soviets could not fathom American fears; the Americans could not fathom the Soviet perception of threat. "You were thinking," said Dobrynin, "that we were going to seize the Middle East oil fields; we were thinking that you wanted to press us militarily—to force us into a new arms race, and to press us from a position of strength."352

In a turbulent world, fear shaped policy. Of course, the Soviets had a real interest in guarding their periphery and the Americans had a real interest in protecting the oil fields of the Persian Gulf, but the Americans were not seeking to lodge themselves inside Afghanistan and the Soviets were not angling to capture the petroleum of the Middle East. The fears that haunted Soviet

and American leaders did not stem from accurate assessments of actual intentions but from deeply embedded ideological axioms about motives and aims.

Although Carter and Brezhnev believed their systems would capture the allegiance of peoples around the globe, they each governed societies whose confidence was waning at a time of economic turmoil and political strife. Détente was a respite to lessen the burdens of the arms race while Soviet and American leaders tackled domestic priorities and insured their countries against the dangers of nuclear war. For Brezhnev and Carter, détente offered glimpses of a more rational world where their two nations could compete peacefully and progress economically. It did not dampen their hopes nor ease their fears. And so it foundered when forces of inexorable change in a dynamic world accentuated their sense of vulnerability and vindicated domestic opponents, who from the outset had never believed that détente was a suitable framework to compete for the soul of mankind.