train South African blacks, the militants of the African National Congress. Soviet influence grew in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The Cuban victory allowed the Soviets to overcome the strain in Soviet-Cuban relations. And this victory was a wonderful gift for Brezhnev and the Party Congress. It helped the Soviet leadership to win support in the nonaligned movement and from those groups in the world that supported the anticolonial and antiapartheid movements.

WOES WITH CARTER

Despite the fracas over Angola, Brezhnev and others in the Politburo expected Ford to win the election and resume the détente partnership. Once again, the volatility of American politics dashed Kremlin expectations. In November 1976, the former governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, a little-known peanut farmer, defeated Ford. Carter had a curious combination of good intentions, strong ideas, vagueness in priorities, and micromanaging style. He had an urge to go beyond the "old agenda" of the Cold War and was committed to the idea of nuclear disarmament. The new president promised a "new foreign policy" that would be less secretive and opaque and more aware of human rights.

Publicly, Carter declared that it was time to overcome "the inordinate fear of communism." Privately, however, a major concern in the White House was whether the Soviet Union would test Carter in the manner Khrushchev had tested Kennedy in 1961. Brezhnev quickly assured Carter that there would be no testing this time. The Kremlin had its own fears about Carter. Some Soviet experts believed that the new and inexperienced president could become a prisoner of anti-détente forces. Carter's secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, was known as a measured pro-détente figure. By contrast, the new national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, raised immediate concerns. Son of a Polish diplomat and a leading scholar of Soviet totalitarianism, he had gained notoriety in Moscow as an architect of strategies to weaken Soviet influence in Central Europe and as a mastermind behind the Trilateral Commission that sought harmony among the three centers of capitalism, the United States, Western Europe, and Japan.

Carter's campaign for human rights immediately marred his relations with the Kremlin. Helsinki Watch groups, formed by activists of the democratic and nationalist movements after August 1975, were active in Moscow, but also in the Ukraine, Lithuania, Georgia, and Armenia; they monitored Soviet violations of the Final Act and reported it to the foreign media. A veteran of the Moscow group recalls that "our most optimistic predictions now seemed within reach: it appeared likely that the new U.S. foreign policy would include insistence that the Soviets live up to the promises made in Helsinki. The alliance of Western politicians and Soviet dissidents was starting to emerge." In retaliation, in January and February 1977, the KGB cracked down on the Helsinki Watch groups and arrested their activists, including Yuri Orlov, Alexander Ginzburg, and Anatoly Scharansky. On February 18, Dobrynin was instructed to convey to Vance that the new American policy fundamentally violated the Basic Principles that Brezhnev and Nixon had agreed to in 1972. Ten days later, Carter invited dissident Vladimir Bukovsky to the White House.

For Brezhnev, the continuation of partnership and progress in arms control was more important than squabbles on human rights. On the eve of Carter's inauguration, the Soviet leader sought to send him a positive signal. Speaking in Tula, on January 18, 1977, Brezhnev, for the first time, presented the Soviet security doctrine in clear defensive terms. The Soviet Union, he said, does not seek superiority for delivering a first strike, and the goal of Soviet military policy was to build a defensive potential sufficient for deterring any potential aggressor. Brezhnev expected that his speech would neutralize a "Soviet military threat" campaign in the American media and help Carter. One of his speechwriters, however, realized that this gesture was not enough. "The noise about the Soviet threat is based on facts," wrote Chernyaev in his diary. "Periodic statements that we threaten nobody will not do the job. If we do not undertake a real change in our military policy, the arms race aimed at our economic exhaustion will continue."

The Soviets longed for policy continuity and confidential relations with the White House, something they had grown accustomed to in the era of Nixon and Kissinger. Carter, however, showed the Soviets that the terms of partnership had to be changed. In vain, Dobrynin sought to reactivate the back channel to Carter via Brzezinski. The new president was determined to deal with the Soviets without secret diplomacy. He wanted to conduct foreign policy through Vance and the State Department. Also, he adopted the arms control proposal developed by Senator Jackson's neoconservative analysts, among them Richard Perle and Paul Nitze. This proposal envisaged "deep cuts" in some strategic systems, above all, the elimination of half of the Satan rockets. This, of course, meant that the much-criticized Vladivostok framework for SALT would be discarded. It also meant that the Soviet side would lose half of its best and biggest missiles in silos, while the Americans would only make a pledge not to deploy future comparable systems. It also deferred the issue of limitations on American cruise missiles and Soviet Backfires, something that the Soviets believed was close to settlement.

Brezhnev was enraged. He felt that he had paid with his own health for the Vladivostok agreement. A new proposal would have meant another round of domestic and international bargaining, something that the ailing general secretary could not afford to do. He instructed Gromyko, Ustinov, and Andropov to
draft a “tough letter” to Carter urging him to reach a fast agreement on the basis of his agreements with Ford at Vladivostok. In the letter, Brezhnev emphasized that this would open the road for their personal meeting, a matter of great importance for the Soviet leader. Carter, surprised by the stern tone of Brezhnev’s message, nevertheless stuck to his guns. He announced that Vance would go to the Soviet Union with a big delegation and new proposals, one with “deep cuts” and another based on the Vladivostok framework, but without limits on cruise missiles and Soviet Backfire bombers. Both proposals were unacceptable to the Soviet military. Before Vance arrived in Moscow, the general secretary met with the troika at his dacha; in all probability all present decided it was time “to teach the Americans a lesson.”

Soviet rejection of the American proposals was inevitable, but its harshness came as a nasty surprise. At the first meeting on March 28, 1977, Brezhnev was peevish and irritated. He and Gromyko did not disguise their contempt for Carter’s policies and some of their remarks were offensive to Carter personally. They interrupted Vance and did not even allow him to read the fallback proposal, which could have opened the road to a compromise. The U.S. delegation returned home empty-handed. Rubbing salt into their wounds, Gromyko denounced the American proposals at a specially convened press conference. As Vance later put it, “We got a wet rug in the face, and were told to go home.”

Brezhnev’s health was definitely a factor in the Moscow fiasco, but the new gap between political priorities of the two sides was much more important. Particularly crucial was the fact that the Soviets wanted to achieve a numerical parity, and this was intolerable to the American side, which previously had had a clear superiority. Even ten years later, when Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev signed a treaty eliminating intermediate range missiles, they failed to agree on a comprehensive framework for the remaining strategic armaments.

The clash on human rights also was another symptom of the widening gap between the Kremlin and the White House. After the years of dealing with the pragmatic Kissinger, the Soviet leaders were convinced that Carter just wanted to take cheap propaganda shots at their expense. The Soviet leaders, products of Stalinist political culture, simply could not conceive why the president paid so much attention to the fate of individual dissidents. Gromyko even forbade his aides from putting information on this matter on his desk. In a conversation with Vance, he wondered: How can the explosion of propaganda hostile to the USSR be explained? Why would the White House not stress the constructive aspects of Soviet foreign policy the way Moscow was doing? Andropov had long insisted that the human rights campaigns were nothing but “attempts of the adversary to activate the hostile elements in the USSR by means of providing them financial and other material assistance.” Nobody realized at the time that the failure of the Moscow talks meant the end of the top-level Soviet-American partnership, a major engine of détente. In February 1977, Brezhnev, on Gromyko’s advice, wrote to Carter that he would meet him only when the SALT agreement was ready for signing. As a result, the next Soviet-American summit did not take place until June 1979, in Vienna, when Brezhnev was already on the verge of physical and mental disintegration.

It is easy now to look at the years after 1977 as the period of the inexorable worsening of Soviet-American relations. Scholars have analyzed major areas and developments that, in their various opinions, contributed to this outcome: continuing Soviet interventionism in Africa; a slow and ultimately fruitless arms control process; and a growing anti-Soviet mood in American domestic politics. Yet all those problems and difficulties had existed before, and still détente had blossomed. And even greater obstacles would not prevent Reagan and Gorbachev from becoming negotiating partners later in the 1980s. One comes to the conclusion that détente would have continued, despite all these problems, had Brezhnev still been willing to make a determined effort to maintain a political partnership with the American leadership. This conclusion does not mean to diminish the complexity of international relations and the decision-making processes in the Soviet regime and the American democracy. It highlights, however, the crucial role of top personalities and their political will at a critical juncture of international history when new opportunities and dangers were arising.

Jimmy Carter’s lack of clear assumptions about the Soviet Union played as much a part in the undoing of détente as Brezhnev’s beliefs had in conceiving it. Under the influence of Brzezinski and neoconservative critics, the U.S. president began to suspect that the Soviet Union was a reckless, unpredictable power, confusing the aging and reactive Kremlin leadership with the activist ramblingous leadership of Nikita Khrushchev. In May 1978, Carter wrote to Brzezinski that “the combination of increasing Soviet military power and political shortsightedness fed by big power ambitions might tempt the Soviet Union both to exploit local turbulence, especially in the Third World, and to intimidate our friends, in order to seek political advantage, and eventually even political preponderance. This is why I do take seriously Soviet action in Africa, and this is why I am concerned about the Soviet military buildup in Europe. I also see some Soviet designs pointed toward the Indian Ocean through South Asia, and perhaps toward the encirclement of China.” In order to contain the Soviets in Africa, Brzezinski and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown came up with a Realpolitik move, a rapprochement with Beijing in order to use “the China card” against the Soviets. Vance opposed such a policy as dangerous for Soviet-American relations, but
Carter sided with Brzezinski and Brown. He sent Brzezinski to Beijing with broad authority to normalize relations with the Chinese Communists. This, Raymond Garthoff observed, set in motion developments that had much broader and deeper consequences than Soviet behavior warranted at the time. About the same time, Dobrynin told Averell Harriman, who attempted to defend the policies of the administration, that nothing would help any longer “to change the emotional atmosphere that existed in Moscow today.”118 The action-reaction cycle, so pronounced in Soviet-American relations before Nixon’s trip to Moscow in May 1972, was back in force. The Politburo, for its part, completely failed to understand the depth of Carter’s motivation to develop arms control and reduce tensions. Instead, Brezhnev and his associates thought that the president was a pawn in the hands of his advisers. Gromyko remarked privately to Vance that “Brzezinski has already surpassed himself” in making statements that “are aimed at nearly bringing us back to the period of the Cold War.” In June 1978, Brezhnev complained at the Politburo that Carter “is not simply falling under the usual influence of the most shameless anti-Soviet types and leaders of the military-industrial complex of the USA. He intends to struggle for reelection for the new term as president under the banner of anti-Soviet policy and return to the Cold War.” Two months later another harsh assessment came to Moscow in the form of a quarterly “political letter” from the Soviet embassy in Washington. It concluded that Carter was reevaluating Soviet-American relations. “The initiative for this affair came from Brzezinski and several presidential advisers on domestic affairs; they convinced Carter that he would succeed in stopping the process of worsening his position in the country if he would openly initiate a harsher course vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.” The report quoted the leader of the U.S. Communist Party, Gus Hall, who referred to Brzezinski as the “Rasputin of the Carter regime.”120

The Vienna summit in June 1979 demonstrated that under different circumstances Brezhnev and Carter might have become good partners. The president was considerate and patient—he visibly tried to find some kind of emotional bond with the Soviet leader. After signing the SALT agreements, the president suddenly reached out to Brezhnev and embraced him. He passed discreetly to Brezhnev the draft of proposals for the next round of arms control talks that proposed reductions of strategic systems. He even refrained from the customary reference to human rights. Brezhnev, despite his asthenia, was moved and later remarked to his associates that Carter was “quite a nice guy, after all.” During the farewell, Carter turned to Soviet interpreter Viktor Sukhodrev and said with his famous smile: “Come back to the United States and bring your President with you.”120 Six months later, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

Politburo members, particularly the troika of Gromyko, Andropov, and Ustinov, continued to misunderstand détente as primarily and even exclusively the result of a “new correlation of forces” and Soviet military strength. For a while, these misperceptions did not look fateful. But Afghanistan changed everything. The military coup in distant Kabul in April 1978 brought sectarian leftists to power. They immediately proclaimed the “April revolution” and appealed to the Soviet Union for assistance. The Soviets had nothing to do with this development and were poorly prepared to deal with it. According to the most recent evidence, even the KGB learned about the leftist coup ex post facto. As Raymond Garthoff observed, Richard Nixon and his regional ally, the Shah of Iran, may have thrown the first pebble that led to the avalanche of events in Afghanistan. In 1976 and 1977, the Shah persuaded President Mohammed Daoud of Afghanistan to move away from his alignment with the Soviet Union and crack down on Afghan leftists.123 Ironically, the Shah’s regime collapsed soon after the situation in Afghanistan began to unravel. The regional balance was destroyed, with disastrous consequences for many years ahead.

From the Kremlin’s viewpoint, the proximity of Afghanistan to Soviet borders and Central Asia made “revolution” there different from otherwise similar cases in Africa. The growing instability on the southern frontiers only increased a temptation to turn Afghanistan into a stable satellite firmly under Soviet tutelage. The shadowy Cold War mentality prevailed in the KGB. As a former senior KGB officer recalls, he viewed Afghanistan as a Soviet sphere of interest and believed that the Soviet Union “had to do whatever possible to prevent the Americans and the CIA from installing an anti-Soviet regime there.” After the 1978 coup, Soviet-Afghan contacts quickly mushroomed via the channels of the Defense Ministry, the KGB, the Foreign Ministry, and a host of other agencies and ministries dealing with, among others, economy, trade, construction, and education. Party delegations and many advisers from Moscow and the Central Asian Soviet republics flocked to Kabul. No doubt the same motives, as during the scramble for Africa, were driving the Soviet political leadership and bureaucracies. Incidentally, the Soviet representatives and advisers in Afghanistan enjoyed the same high salaries in foreign currency as their colleagues had in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Yemen, and other countries of the third world, where they performed “internationalist duty” to “assist the regimes with socialist orientation.”122

Very quickly, the Soviet advisers and visitors fell into the trap of fractious revolutionary politics. The leaders of the Khalq faction, Prime Minister Nur Mohammad Taraki and his entrepreneurial deputy, Hafizullah Amin, began to purge the
rival Parcham group. The Afghan leaders believed in revolutionary terror and drew inspiration from the Stalinist purges. In September 1978, Boris Ponomarev, of the International Committee, undertook a secret mission to Afghanistan, to warn Taraki that the Soviet Union would turn away from him if he continued to destroy his fellow revolutionaries. These warnings, as well as Soviet appeals for unity, fell on deaf ears. The Afghani revolutionaries correctly believed that the Soviet Union simply could not afford to let them down. Shortly before Ponomarev’s mission, the head of the KGB’s intelligence directorate, Vladimir Kryuchkov, visited Kabul and signed an agreement on sharing intelligence and cooperation.

The main purpose of the agreement was “to fight the growing CIA presence in Kabul and throughout Afghanistan.” On December 5, 1978, Brezhnev and Taraki met in Moscow and signed the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation. Taraki returned to Kabul convinced that Brezhnev personally supported him. Indeed, Brezhnev liked the deceptively debonair leader of Afghanistan.

In March 1979, a cruel wake-up call reached Moscow. The city and area of Herat had rebelled against the Khalq regime, and an insurgent mob had brutally killed Kabul’s officials, Soviet advisers, and their families. Taraki and Amin made desperate calls to Moscow pleading for Soviet military intervention “to save the revolution.” It was the first strong sign that another force, militant Afghan nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism, had come on the scene. The Politburo, once again, was caught by surprise and was not adequately equipped to analyze this new development. The Kremlin discussions reveal with startling clarity the perils of the fictitious Brezhnev leadership in a crisis situation. At the start of the discussion, the foreign policy troika advocated Soviet military intervention to save the Kabul regime. They agreed that “losing Afghanistan” as part of the Soviet sphere of influence would be unacceptable, geopolitically and ideologically. Brezhnev was absent, resting at his dacha. The interventionist tide gained momentum fast.

The next day, everything changed: all support for intervention literally evaporated overnight. Ustinov was the first to spell out the truth: the Kabul leadership wanted Soviet troops to fight Islamic fundamentalism, a danger they had themselves created by their radical reforms. Andropov argued that “we can uphold the revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, and that is completely impermissible for us.” Gromyko came up with another argument: “All that we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of détente of international relations, arms reductions, and much more—all that would be overthrown. China, of course, will receive a nice gift. All the nonaligned countries will be against us.” The foreign minister also reminded the Politburo that military intervention would lead to cancellation of the summit with Carter in Vienna and also the visit of French president Giscard d’Estaing, scheduled for the end of March.

Why this shift? New information, particularly a telephone conversation between Kosygin and Taraki, clarified the realities in Afghanistan. An even more decisive factor, however, must have been Brezhnev’s personal intervention and the position of his foreign policy assistant, Alexandrov-Agentov. As Gromyko spelled out, Brezhnev maintained a stake in détente. His interest in signing the SALT agreement with the United States and avoiding anything that might complicate his meetings with other Western leaders carried the decisive weight. He also, by nature, regarded any military intervention as a weapon of last resort. Brezhnev appeared in person at the Politburo, which was in session continuously for three days, against intervention. After a Soviet military plane brought Taraki to Moscow, he was informed that Soviet forces would not be deployed in Afghanistan. The Soviets pledged additional assistance to the Afghan army and put pressure on Pakistan and Iran to limit the penetration of Islamic radical forces into Afghanistan. After listening to Taraki’s brief reply, Brezhnev stood up and left, as if to say that the matter was closed.

The decision against intervention, however, did not seem final. The initial interventionist stand of the troika spelled trouble for the future. The illusory project of leading Afghanistan “along the path of socialist reform” was not renounced. In fact, Gromyko, Andropov, Ustinov, and Ponomarev reaffirmed it in their memorandum to the Politburo soon after Taraki left Moscow. As a result, Soviet material investments in the Kabul regime increased, and the number of Soviet advisers, mostly of the military and the KGB, reached an estimated 4,000 people.

All this proved fateful when the next power struggle in Afghanistan took place between Taraki and Amin. Indeed, the outcome could have been predicted. Hafizullah Amin was a much more shrewd and efficient leader, with personal attributes and style that strongly resembled those of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Amin’s role model was Joseph Stalin; he relied on brutal force in building the regime and was prepared to take big risks in pursuing his ambitious goals. His energy in building the Afghan army and putting down the revolt in Herat won him the sympathies of Soviet military advisers. Brezhnev, however, was on Taraki’s side. In early September 1979, the Afghan prime minister stopped in Moscow on the way home after a meeting of nonaligned countries in Havana. Brezhnev and Andropov told him that Amin was planning a coup against him and had just removed his people from the key positions in the security services. There is reason to believe that after that conversation the KGB, together with the Soviet
embassy in Kabul, attempted to remove Amin but that the plot backfired. Whatever happened, Amin arrested Taraki and on October 9 ordered him strangled in his prison cell. After that, Amin expelled the Soviet ambassador. The assassination of Brezhnev’s favorite suddenly involved the general secretary personally and emotionally in the affairs of the Afghan revolution. Brezhnev allegedly told Andropov and Ustinov: “What kind of scum is this Amin—to strangle the man with whom he participated in the revolution? Who is now at the helm of the Afghan revolution? What will people say in other countries? Can one trust Brezhnev’s words?” The momentum for Soviet military intervention and the removal of Amin began to grow from that point on. Very soon after Taraki’s murder, Brezhnev’s foreign policy assistant, Alexandrov-Agentov, reportedly told one official of the International Department that it was necessary to send troops to Afghanistan.

The quick escalation of the revolution in Iran after January 1979, proclamation of the Islamic Republic in Iran on March 31 of the same year, and rapidly growing Iranian support of fundamentalist rebels in southwest Afghanistan probably contributed to the reassessment of the nonintervention decision. The Kremlin leaders could not know that the Iranian revolution would introduce a new era of radical Islam that would outlive the Cold War and the Soviet Union. They suspected and, initially, grossly exaggerated an American involvement with the growing fundamentalist movement in Afghanistan. Ustinov, Andropov, and Alexandrov-Agentov in particular began to think about Afghanistan exclusively in the light of Soviet-American zero-sum competition. The introduction of U.S. forces into the Persian Gulf after the capture of the American embassy by Islamic radicals on November 4, 1979, alarmed the General Staff. General Valentin Varennikov recalled that at that time “we were concerned that if the United States were forced from Iran, they would move their bases to Pakistan and seize Afghanistan.”

Minister of Defense Ustinov reportedly wondered: If Americans do all these preparations under our noses, why should we hunker down, play cautious, and lose Afghanistan? Under these circumstances, the KGB reports from Kabul that Amin was playing a double game and meeting secretly with Americans were particularly disturbing. Sadat’s betrayal a few years earlier prepared a fertile ground for suspicions to grow.

The Soviet decision to eliminate Amin and “save” Afghanistan is a remarkable case of “group think” at the very top of Soviet leadership, above all among the policy-making troika. At some point in October and November, Andropov supported Ustinov’s position and the two began to plot an invasion. Then Gromyko and Alexandrov-Agentov gave their consent. The principals kept the preparations in deep secret from the rest of the Politburo and from their own staff analysts.
conditions and reminded the political leaders that the fears of hostile American activities in the region were imaginary. Instead of discussing Ogarkov’s concerns, Ustinov, whose relations with the marshal were strained, told him to shut up and obey the leadership. Minutes later, at the Politburo session, Ogarkov tried again to warn of serious fallout from the invasion. “We would align the entire Islamic East against us and suffer political damage around the world.” Andropov cut him off: “Focus on military affairs! Leave policy-making to us, the party, and Leonid Ilyich!” On that day, the Politburo did not come to a decision. Two days later, on December 12, Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko learned that NATO had decided to deploy Pershing missiles and cruise missiles in Europe. This time the Politburo approved the Ustinov-Andropov plan to “save” Afghanistan through the combination of a coup and military intervention. Brezhnev, very feeble but visibly emotional, affixed his signature to the decision to intervene.138

The crude incompetence of the Soviet invasion blew away Moscow’s official cover that the Kabul government had actually requested the Soviet Union to defend them. The clumsiness of the KGB contributed to the problem. At first, Soviet agents attempted to poison Amin, but when the poison failed to work, commandos stormed Amin’s palace, causing a bloodbath. Fierce American and international reaction to this bloody coup caused the entire edifice of superpower détente to crumble. There is evidence that Brezhnev took the dismantling of détente by Washington personally and dimly understood that the intervention in Afghanistan was a gross error. His foreign policy adviser recalled that the general secretary once complained to Andropov and Ustinov: “You got me into this mess!”139

Brezhnev’s career as a statesman was at its end—a very bleak one. Chernyaev wrote in his diary: “I do not believe that ever before in Russian history, even under Stalin, was there a period when such important actions were taken without a hint of discussion, advice and deliberation. We entered a very dangerous period when the ruling circle cannot fully appreciate what it is doing and why.”140 Chernyaev and other “enlightened” functionaries waited for a miracle that could help the Soviet Union weather this dangerous stretch.

The superpower confrontation of the early 1980s had a feeling of déjà vu. The rampant arms race, covert battles between secret services around the world, and fierce psychological warfare gave the situation a resemblance to the last years of Stalin’s rule. The Reagan administration sought to roll back the Soviet empire, just as the Truman and Eisenhower administrations had done in the early 1950s. Some in the West forecast a dangerous decade and predicted that “the Soviet Union would risk nuclear war if her leaders believed the integrity of the empire to be at stake.”

This chapter focuses on the behavior of the Kremlin in the face of growing confrontation. The last years of Brezhnev’s rule and the next two years of interregnum under the leadership of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko were times of deterioration of the political and economic foundations of Soviet power. Western analysts, including those in the CIA, suspected that the Soviet economy was in bad shape and that the Soviet hold on Central Europe was shaky. But they did not imagine how bad the situation really was. The Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980 and 1981 and the growing dependency of other countries of the Warsaw Pact on the economic and financial power of Western capitalist countries gravely undermined the empire built by Stalin. The Kremlin rulers lacked the political will and resourcefulness to stop the erosion of Soviet power. At no point from 1981 to 1985 did the Kremlin leaders contemplate anything resembling preparations for an ultimate showdown with the West.2

**POLAND: A CORNERSTONE CRACKS**

In August 1980, labor strikes in Gdansk escalated into a crisis of the Communist regime in Poland. The phenomenal success of Solidarity, especially the impressive coordination and efficiency of this seemingly chaotic democratic movement,