

Notes on Discussion

Washington, February 11, 1961.

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THE THINKING OF THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP, CABINET ROOM, FEBRUARY 11, 1961

PRESENT

The President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, Ambassador Harriman, Ambassador Thompson, Mr. Bohlen, Mr. Kennan, Mr. Bundy

The subjects discussed can be grouped under four headings:

1. The general condition of the USSR and its government.
2. Current Soviet attitudes on foreign affairs.
3. Useful American policies and attitudes.
4. Methods of negotiation, and problem of a possible meeting between the President and Khrushchev.

1. General condition of the USSR and its government

Ambassador Thompson reported that, in a general way, the Soviet Government is strong, and Soviet economic growth a formidable fact. But agriculture is a deep problem; the government may be facing a third successive year of bad harvests.

On the industrial side, while there are still problems in the process of control and decentralization of the growing machine, prospects for continued strong growth are good, and the regime can use these resources in a showy way--as for example by constructing the largest heated swimming pool in the world. Both at home and abroad we can expect new Soviet activities as the economic base grows.

At the same time, there is a rapid growth in consumer demand. When there was almost no new housing, public pressure for more was slight, but now everyone has a friend with a new house, and "the appetite grows with eating," especially while the apparatus of terror is left unused. In agriculture, the avoidance of terror complicates a problem already made difficult by technological backwardness: Secretary Rusk pointed out in this connection that the agricultural experts of the Rockefeller Foundation are persuaded that there are deep weaknesses in Soviet work in this area, largely as a result of the influence of Lysenko.

But difficulties in agriculture should not obscure the growing strength of the Soviet Union as a whole, or the stability of the Khrushchev government. Khrushchev's personal position is strong. While the Government is a collective enterprise, it is increasingly a collective enterprise of Khrushchev's supporters. Only if he should face unusually grave difficulties both in agriculture and in foreign affairs would Khrushchev's political control be seriously threatened.

Soviet military strength is formidable. Ambassador Thompson is inclined to believe that in the area of conventional forces this strength may be somewhat exaggerated by most American estimators, but he offers no separate estimate of Soviet missile capability, and he agrees with Mr. Bohlen's comment that in the last five years the general Soviet posture has been made stronger and bolder by growing confidence in the Soviet military position. On the other hand, there was general agreement with Mr. Kennan's comment that Soviet leaders do not think in terms of a narrowly military calculus, and expect to win by the play of other forces, while their military strength protects the "forces of history" from the "imperialists."

Khrushchev's own deepest desire is to gain time for the forthcoming triumphs of Soviet economic progress; for this he really wants a generally unexplosive period in foreign affairs.

2. Current Soviet attitudes on foreign affairs

While the Soviet attitude toward the world is fundamentally optimistic, Khrushchev would very much like some specific diplomatic successes in 1961. Perhaps his first hope here is that, through negotiations with the new American administration, there may be progress toward disarmament. Soviet interest in this area appears real; "we do have one common enemy--war." While Khrushchev's interest in exploiting Berlin continues, he is not likely to bring

this situation to a boil unless there is a breakdown of negotiations on disarmament, or perhaps an increase in tension in such a place as Laos.

After the United States, the great long-run worries of the Soviet Union are Germany and Red China. These are the countries whose relations to the atomic problem seem an important one to the Soviet Union, and indeed effective restraint of the Chinese Communists is a continuing task of the Soviet government. In this connection, Mr. Bohlen recommended--and later agreed to send over--certain documents telling the exact nature of the sharp dialogue between the Russians and the Chinese.

But if Soviet concern over Germany's relation to atomic weapons is real, it is also an example of the duality of Soviet thinking: the German question is not only a real worry, but an excellent crowbar with which to pry at the seams of the Atlantic alliance. Mr. Bohlen, in particular, emphasized that nearly every Soviet argument must be appraised not only as evidence of the rational calculations of a powerful government, but also as part of a process of cynical manipulation by a group of doctrinaires profoundly committed to the advancement of their party and their ideology by every available means.

Meanwhile, around the world Soviet leaders are cheerfully taking advantage of targets of opportunity, and their recent successes in such areas as Laos, the Congo, and Cuba have made them confident, perhaps overconfident, about their prospects in such adventures. In these areas they appear to be following a policy of backing promising political leaders who are hostile to the West, whether or not they are explicitly Communist in their allegiance, in the hope that timely support of such leaders may make easier the gradual growth of Communist influence and the eventual Communist takeover; this is a change from earlier doctrinaire commitment to Communists alone.

3. Useful American policies and attitudes toward the Soviet Union

Precisely because of the double character of the Soviet behavior, American policy must be both rationally stated and evidently strong. Strength is not entirely a military matter, and, in some areas, other things are more important. In Laos, for example, allied disunity and the failure of the West to find and support an esteemed non-Communist leader have played into the hands of Communists. Moreover, while strength is essential, noisy demonstrations of strength are likely to be counter-productive, because of the high sensitivity and pride--and perhaps the inferiority complex, in some sense--of the Soviet

government. On the other hand, it should not be assumed that the Soviet Union would react violently to a possible swift action against the Castro government. A quick fait accompli would probably lead to only verbal reactions. On the other hand a long civil war might well generate strong pressures upon the Soviet government to prove its greatness on behalf of an embattled ally in the great contest against imperialism. (In this connection, the experts agreed that Soviet intervention in Hungary was on an entirely different plane, resting as it did upon a deep-seated Soviet conviction that a continuation of the Hungarian revolution would have undermined the entire Communist position in Eastern Europe.) In such a case as Berlin, only strength and firmness would do.

4. Methods of negotiation and the problem of a possible meeting of the President and Mr. Khrushchev

In general, it was felt that we were on the right track in maintaining a quiet and courteous tone in direct exchanges with the Soviet government. The last months of the old administration had created blocks to communication which were now being removed by the fact of a change. While Khrushchev evidently disliked Nixon (especially because of a speech to the dentists), he had liked Eisenhower personally, without respecting him very much as a leader. But the events leading up to the Paris summit had been a great blow to his pride, and had so shaken him that further effective negotiation could not occur with the outgoing administration. He is now eager, above all other immediate desires, for an early meeting with the President, and there seemed considerable feeling among the experts that a meeting in due course, for an exchange of courtesies and the opportunity of becoming personally acquainted, might be useful. Nothing approaching a summit, in terms of serious negotiations, should be considered favorably for the present. There was a strong feeling, sharply expressed by Mr. Bohlen, that it would be unwise to have Khrushchev come to the United Nations, as a means toward any early meeting, because the Soviet leader cannot resist a rostrum, and his speeches in the UN would be unlikely to add to the sum of international good will, or Soviet-American understanding.

Thus it might well be wise to indicate quite promptly to Khrushchev that, while the President looks forward to meeting him before too much time has passed, it does not look as if a meeting in connection with the General Assembly would be possible or productive. In this same connection, Mr. Harriman suggested that the President might well say quite candidly that it would be hard to meet with Mr. Khrushchev before he has had a chance to meet and talk with the heads of the principal allied governments.

But if courtesy and a moderate tone of voice are appropriate in our first exchanges with Khrushchev, there is no reason to tolerate or leave without comment the continuing Soviet attempt to use both the high road and the low road. Savage and continuing denunciation of the United States as the principal enemy of mankind, from the highest levels of the Soviet government, is not really consistent with effective negotiation between the two great states, and this point can usefully be made. If they believe these things, what chance is there we can reach reliable agreements with each other? If they do not believe them, what use is there in our sitting down to talk with such obviously cynical opponents?

The President, in any meeting with Khrushchev, would wish to show both a willingness to negotiate reasonably and great strength and firmness. He would wish to avoid the fuzziness which made trouble for President Eisenhower in the Berlin negotiations--it never helps in negotiating with the Russians to use ambiguous words or phrases which may be taken in quite different ways by the two sides.

It was agreed that there would be no decision at present on the question of a meeting. Meanwhile communications with the Soviet Union could usefully continue, through diplomatic channels, on a variety of topics, as further examination might decree. Among the topics considered as likely for such treatment were Laos, commercial conversations, the consular convention, air transport, exchange of persons, and of course the test ban negotiations. These last may be perhaps the most important element in American-Soviet relations in the immediate future.

In Conclusion:

Ambassador Thompson, in response to a concluding question from the President, summarized the requirements upon the United States in four steps: first, and most important, we must make our own system work. Second, we must maintain the unity of the West. Third, we must find ways of placing ourselves in new and effective relations to the great forces of nationalism and anti-colonialism. Fourth, we must, in these ways and others, change our image before the world so that it becomes plain that we and not the Soviet Union stand for the future.

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