LESSONS OF THE YOM KIPPUR ALERT

by Scott D. Sagan

In a play of mystery and hazard, the U.S. government ordered a worldwide military alert on the night of October 24, 1973, in the midst of the Yom Kippur war between Israel and the Arab States. It was the first such alert in 11 years, since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. The machinery of détente diplomacy had broken down; the personal relationship between Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, the informal meetings of then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, and the network of other negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union all momentarily proved inadequate to produce a cease-fire.

Faced with the possibility of unilateral Soviet intervention in Egypt, the United States resorted to an unsubtle display of American military muscle. Yet the tension subsided the following afternoon when the Soviet Union accepted a U.N. resolution to send a nonsuperpower force to the Middle East to supervise a cease-fire.

The tension passed, but the mystery endures. Why did the crisis occur? How was the momentum toward confrontation stopped? Was the American alert even necessary or was it simply a ploy to remove the Watergate scandal from the headlines?

When a crisis ends, the search for lessons begins. However, the lessons of the Yom Kippur alert are misleading, often contradictory, and, like the event itself, shrouded in ambiguity. History can offer the statesman meaningful insights, but decisions in times of crisis must be based not on the ambiguous facts of the present nor on the confusing

SCOTT D. SAGAN *is a Ph.D. candidate and a teaching fellow in the government department at Harvard University.*

lessons of the past, but on intuition and foresight.

Uncertainty lay at the heart of the Yom Kippur alert. Policy makers in both Washington and Moscow sensed a loss of control and a dangerous momentum toward confrontation. American actions during the crisis can be considered a success, because conflict between the superpowers was avoided, Soviet troops were not placed in Egypt, and the Middle East war ended in a stalemate. At the time, however, fear and caution—not confidence—prevailed.

The decision to put American forces on nuclear alert did not prove the hollowness of détente, as is often argued, but it did demonstrate its limitations. Détente provided a positive atmosphere for crisis management but it could not prevent a dangerous crisis from developing. Ironically, Soviet and American goals on October 24 were more similar than they were incompatible: Neither nation supported an overwhelming Israeli victory, and both wanted the encircled Egyptian Third Army to be saved. Thus, it is curious that the crisis escalated as far as it did. The United States and the Soviet Union were reluctant adversaries during the Yom Kippur war, driven on a collision course by their respective allies. Future Soviet-American crises are likely to be similar in character.

The Fog of Battle

In a political sense, Israel lost the fourth Middle East war on October 6, when the Arabs succeeded in launching a well-coordinated and vigorous surprise attack, thus shattering the assumptions of Israel's military omnipotence. The Arab policy of no war–no peace ended when Egyptian troops crossed the Suez Canal, and from that time American actions would be governed by what could be called a no victory–no defeat policy. This involved five major goals that were pursued and delicately balanced by Kissinger.

The first was to make sure that the Israelis suffered no overwhelming defeat. The second was to avoid the more likely possibility of an

overwhelming Israeli victory, for U.S. policy makers believed that anything more decisive than a stalemate would jeopardize a postwar settlement.

The third general objective was to find an end to the war that left the United States in a position to serve as arbiter for future peace negotiations. To accomplish this goal, Washington had to maintain credibility with the Arabs in general and forge a new relationship with Egypt in particular. (Kissinger reportedly went so far as to propose painting the logo of Israel's commercial airline, El Al, on American planes used in the airlift of supplies to the Israelis, because it would, he told Nixon, "destroy the chances for negotiations in the future if [the U.S.] profile was too high.") The United States also had to make sure that the Soviet Union did not emerge from the fog of battle perceived as the protector of the Arab cause.

Fourth, the United States was intent on preserving the tenuous relationship of détente with the USSR, hence the general tendency to downplay Soviet involvement at the start of the war. Yet Washington was also determined not to appear weak. Although there was considerable domestic pressure to help the Israelis, the motivation for the American airlift should also be seen in light of the Soviet-American rivalry: The war had become one of American guns versus Soviet guns. Finally, the U.S. government wanted to prevent escalation of the war into a direct superpower confrontation.

Soviet objectives in the conflict were threefold. First, an Arab defeat on the scale of 1967 had to be prevented. Moscow believed that a limited Arab victory or even a stalemate would enhance its position in the Middle East. Thus, the Soviet airlift to the Arabs was more an effort to minimize their expected defeat than an attempt to help them achieve an overwhelming victory. Moscow's second objective was to avoid becoming directly involved in the conflict. It feared a repetition of 1967, when a Soviet military intervention appeared necessary to save the

Arabs. The third objective was to limit the effect of the war on détente and to reduce the likelihood of direct superpower confrontation. Thus, Brezhnev restrained his Arab allies from interfering with the American airlift, and he refused to allow Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat to use his Soviet-supplied missiles against U.S. planes landing provisions for Israeli forces in the Sinai.

At the Soviets' request, Kissinger flew to Moscow at 1 a.m. on October 20. Within 48 hours a Middle East cease-fire (Resolution 338) was negotiated, written, and pushed through the U.N. Security Council. The

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Soviets had worked intermittently for a cease-fire from the start of the war, and with Israeli forces rapidly expanding their positions on the west bank of the Suez Canal after October 15, they became increasingly anxious about Egypt's military plight. Kissinger's motivations for supporting an end to the fighting at this point were more complicated. Before he left for Moscow, he had given Israel very strong indications that no cease-fire was imminent. Whether or not he intentionally misled the Israelis, it is clear that the government in Tel Aviv fervently believed that its armed forces were not pressed for time.

It is quite plausible that the secretary of state's reasons for supporting Resolution 338 had little to do with Soviet pressure. After the Israeli victory in the Sinai, Washington may initially have desired further Israeli military success, not so much to punish the Egyptians as to teach the Russians a lesson. But by the time of the Moscow summit, Kissinger was probably concerned that the Israelis were approaching the overwhelming victory he wanted to deny them. He was faced with the difficult task of timing the cease-fire to occur after Israel had been given ample

opportunity to fight back, but before the Egyptian Third Army could be crushed.

Alternatively, Kissinger may have been persuaded to support an immediate cease-fire by the Soviets at the negotiating table rather than by action on the battlefield. The Soviets may have threatened to take irrevocable steps unless the Israelis were stopped, but they also offered major concessions. After initially insisting on a cease-fire linked to Israeli withdrawal to its pre-1967 borders, Brezhnev reportedly reversed himself on the second day of negotiations and accepted a simple cease-fire in place. Moreover, Moscow and Cairo agreed for the first time to begin immediate and direct negotiations with the Israelis. Finally, Soviet diplomats conceded privately that minor clarifications of Israel's pre-1967 borders were permissible.

Decisive Humiliation

During the afternoon and early evening of October 21, Soviet and American negotiators hammered out the terms and even the exact wording of the cease-fire. At 12:49 a.m. on October 22, the Security Council adopted Resolution 338 calling upon "all parties to the present fighting to cease all firing and terminate all military activity" within 12 hours.

In Moscow Kissinger told newsmen that the superpower agreement proved the effectiveness of détente. This was true in the sense that direct negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union during a regional conflict had succeeded in producing an agreement. But Resolution 338 had one major, almost disastrous flaw: It lacked an enforcement clause. The U.N. had on several occasions in the past adopted a cease-fire resolution before working out the details for its supervision. But this time even the day that separated the passing of Resolution 338 and the adoption of enforcement provisions made a difference on the battlefield. The superpowers had agreed to a step-by-step cease-fire in Moscow; but the war ran one step ahead.

The Israeli government responded to the

Kissinger-Brezhnev agreement with shock and anger—shock because the Israelis did not expect Kissinger's trip to produce an immediate cease-fire, anger because the resolution was presented to Israel as a fait accompli. Thus, the Israelis had to make a very difficult decision in an atmosphere of confusion and bitterness.

The cabinet met throughout the night of October 21, and at 3:00 the next morning, just as the Security Council was about to begin its debate on Resolution 338, it announced its decision to accept the Moscow agreement. But it made this decision fully realizing that although Israel had little choice but to accept the cease-fire handed down from Washington, it could influence how quickly the agreement would be implemented. The end of the war clearly loomed ahead; the Israelis were determined to kick the horizon a little further.

Although the Israelis were under considerable pressure to accept Resolution 338, the possible loss of American support was not the only consideration in the cabinet's decision. Some ministers flatly refused to accept any agreement that would allow Arab armies to remain in the Sinai, regardless of the American reaction. But others understood that a cease-fire would have to be implemented at some point and that October 22 was an acceptable time to end the fighting, because Israeli forces in Egypt were now secure and had proved Israel's military superiority. Moreover, some ministers believed that a decisive humiliation of the Egyptians might not work in Israel's favor.

Tel Aviv was also impressed by the fact that Resolution 338 provided for immediate and direct negotiations between Egypt and Israel. As Kissinger had anticipated, the prospect of sitting at the negotiating table with the Egyptians for the first time since independence was in itself a victory for the Israelis. Paradoxically, however, this provision gave the Israelis an incentive to prolong the conflict and surround the Third Army in order to enhance its bargaining position.

In essence, the Israeli government decided that it would not respect the cease-fire if the Egyptians committed even the smallest violation. But, given the positions of Egyptian and Israeli forces on the west bank of the Suez Canal and in the Sinai, it was totally unrealistic to expect no violations at all. By making their respect for the cease-fire conditional on the impossible, the Israelis acted as if they did not respect it at all.

Hoping to soften Israel's anger over the shock of the cease-fire, Kissinger gave Tel Aviv the impression that continued hostilities would not be dangerous. He told then Foreign Minister Abba Eban that he hoped "the cease-fire, agreed upon in principle the night before, could come into effect within a day or two," certainly not a statement that would encourage strict adherence to the U.N. resolution. It is unclear whether Kissinger committed a diplomatic sin of omission or commission, but a diplomatic transgression it was. For when he returned to Washington, the Israelis believed they could outrun the agreement for a few more days.

Fighting resumed within hours of the cease-fire deadline. The United States reacted with relative complacency, the Soviet Union and Egypt with fear and anger, and Israel with a sense of satisfaction. The Egyptians trapped in the Sinai probably fired the first shots, apparently acting against Sadat's orders, but Israel responded with a full continuation of military activities. Tanks and supplies rolled across the Suez Canal through the night of October 22, and the next day Israeli forces were driving both south toward Suez City and north toward Ismailia. By dusk on the 23rd, the Egyptian Third Army was completely surrounded.

From Brezhnev's perspective, there was good reason to be pleased with the results of the Moscow meeting. The contradiction inherent in the Soviet desire both to support the Arabs and to maintain détente had been safely defused. When the Israelis accepted Resolution 338, Brezhnev probably stopped having nightmares in Arabic. There would

be no need to bail out Egypt and hence little danger of a military confrontation with the United States.

The events of the next three days, however, aroused new anxieties in Moscow. The Soviets feared that the United States was unwilling to force Israel to honor the cease-fire, that the United States might be unable to control its client, and that there was little the Soviets could do about the deteriorating situation short of threatening direct military intervention. They reacted by adopting a policy that reflected not bravado, but anxiety; not skillful manipulation, but dangerous loss of control.

Kissinger had assured the Soviets that Israel would comply with Resolution 338. When the war resumed, the Soviets questioned both his words and his motives. Kissinger understood this concern immediately. Upon learning on the 23rd that Israeli forces had surrounded Suez City, he reportedly exclaimed, "My God, the Russians will think that I have double-crossed them. And in their shoes, who wouldn't?"

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If the secretary of state was determined to save the Egyptian Third Army at this point, he did not effectively communicate that to Moscow. Moreover, the Soviets were looking for changes in Israeli battlefield behavior, not more promises from Kissinger. When the second cease-fire (Resolution 339) went into effect at 7:00 a.m. on the 24th, the Egyptian Third Army was surrounded by Israeli forces in the Sinai peninsula, and Cairo and Egypt's Second Army were vulnerable to attack.

The Kremlin's effort to establish an effective cease-fire before the Israelis could defeat its client was a race against time. Moscow protested against Israeli violations, hoping that Kissinger would apply direct pressure on Tel Aviv to stop the fighting, and it

cooperated with the United States at the U.N. in trying to establish effective supervision clauses for future Security Council resolutions. The other option available to Moscow and the only one over which it had complete control, was the threat of unilateral military intervention. Every hour of delay worked against the Soviets and the Egyptians; the Third Army had neither food nor water.

Sadat panicked first. On the 24th, he called for American and Soviet forces to be sent to the Middle East to observe the cease-fire. Nixon immediately rejected the idea, and Dobrynin told Kissinger that Moscow was not interested in a joint force either. At the U.N., however, Soviet Ambassador Yakov A. Malik called Sadat's request "entirely justified" and added that the American response would be a Soviet test of "trust toward the United States and Secretary Kissinger." The nonaligned members of the Security Council were urging that a superpower force be created, and Dobrynin called to tell Kissinger that the Soviet Union would support such a resolution. Kissinger opposed the idea and warned that the two superpowers were headed for a confrontation.

Meanwhile, on October 23 the Soviets publicly denounced and threatened Israel, warning that the "gravest consequences" would result from a continued Israeli advance. Even earlier during the crisis, they had placed some airborne divisions in Eastern Europe on alert. This status was heightened on the 23rd, and logistical units in the Ukraine were readied. An airborne command post was established on Wednesday afternoon, the 24th. Then, that night, Nixon received Brezhnev's famous note:

> Let us together . . . urgently dispatch Soviet and American contingents to Egypt. . . . I will say it straight, that if you find it impossible to act together with us in this matter, we should be faced with the necessity urgently to consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally. Israel cannot be allowed to get away with the violations.

The Murky Light of Uncertainty

The combination of ambiguous military intelligence and Brezhnev's message created a crisis atmosphere in the White House. Kissinger suggested to Nixon that an American military response might be necessary, and the president empowered him to do whatever he believed was appropriate. Kissinger convened an ad hoc meeting of the National Security Council (NSC). Then Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger and Kissinger were the only regular members of the council able to attend. Nixon remained in his private quarters the entire evening, and Vice President Spiro Agnew had resigned two weeks earlier (Gerald Ford was not yet confirmed as his replacement). But Kissinger and Schlesinger were joined by William Colby, then director of central intelligence; Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Alexander Haig and Brent Scowcroft from the NSC staff.

Within an hour, American conventional and nuclear forces—approximately 2.2 million soldiers worldwide—were receiving Defense-Condition 3 alert orders from Washington. (Defense-Condition 3 is the middle status of the five-step American military alert system.[1] All U.S. personnel on leave were ordered back to their posts, American weapons and forces worldwide—both conventional and nuclear—were placed at a higher level of readiness, and U.S. Strategic Air Command bombers were alerted. Although American intelligence reports of the corresponding Soviet alert were ambiguous and contradictory, it is agreed that Moscow prepared only conventional forces.)

Why did this happen? This type of decision is made in a kind of twilight. U.S. policy makers could interpret the Kremlin's ambiguous behavior in three different ways: as a threat, a form of coercive crisis diplomacy, or a bluff. The first interpretation

[1] *Def-Con 1 is the highest military alert stage, when attack is imminent. Def-Con 5 is the normal condition, when there is no threat of attack.*

postulates that Moscow wanted to put military forces into Egypt, not simply to save the Third Army, but primarily to establish a permanent military presence in the Middle East. Nixon accepted this view and endorsed the decision to put U.S. forces on alert because, as he later explained, he believed that the Russians were just following Lenin's dictum: "Probe with bayonets: If you encounter mush, proceed; if you encounter steel, withdraw."

Yet Soviet policy throughout the Yom Kippur war discredits this position, for Moscow's actions were characterized by caution rather than recklessness. In fact, one Soviet objective had been to avoid the very situation that had now arisen. The Soviets had rejected earlier requests to intervene militarily and had not sought a role in supervising the cease-fire between October 20 and 23. Perhaps more important, they did not attempt to present the United States with a fait accompli. For while the Soviets must have been tempted by the prospect of stationing their troops in Egypt, the potential negative effects of such action on détente and the fear that it would result in a confrontation with the United States forced them to move slowly, with extreme caution. Finally, to argue that the Soviet Union hoped Washington was unable to act decisively because of the Watergate scandal would be the opposite of the truth. The Soviets were counting on Washington to pressure Tel Aviv to stop the fighting; they feared, not hoped, that America was a paralyzed giant.

A more plausible explanation for Soviet behavior is that Moscow wanted to send a harsh signal to the United States and was only reluctantly preparing for military action. Moscow had waited almost two-and-a-half days for the Americans to stop the Israeli advance. Direct threats to Israel, efforts in the U.N., and private protests to Kissinger had all failed. If Kissinger could not stop the Israeli army, the Soviets might have to use military force. If they could get away with a unilateral intervention, all the

better. It is even possible that they thought the American secretary of state might, under pressure, accept some form of joint force. Yet they probably hoped the alert and verbal threat might force Kissinger to increase his pressure on Israel, for the safe option was a U.S. diplomatic intervention, not a Soviet military intervention.

A third plausible explanation is that the Soviets were bluffing and had no intention of sending troops to Egypt at all. In past Middle East conflicts, the Soviet Union had belatedly threatened to intervene but had never done so.[2] These threats were simply considered examples of bravado designed to enhance Soviet prestige in Arab countries. If Moscow was again following this pattern in 1973, a relatively passive American response would be both safe and appropriate. But if the Soviets were seriously contemplating intervention, the United States would have to convince them that such action was dangerous and unnecessary.

In the murky light of uncertainty, Kissinger and Schlesinger chose a policy they believed would best dissuade the Soviet Union from unilateral intervention. If there was any doubt in Brezhnev's mind about the U.S. response to this kind of action, the U.S. military alert would make him more cautious. The United States was playing it safe in a dangerous way: Raising the crisis to precarious heights was seen as the most effective way of deterring Moscow.

Kissinger believed that a Soviet intervention would threaten not only Israel, but America's global prestige as well. The immediate threat, while worrisome, was less important than the precedent it could set. Kissinger was determined that the United States would appear firm against any Soviet threat, anywhere in the world, regardless of whether the threat was only a bluff. One State Department official's candid remark best explains the motivations behind the alert: "You know, it didn't make any dif-

[2] *The one exception, the placement of Soviet pilots in Egypt in 1970, was done clandestinely.*

ference if you thought they [the Soviets] would intervene or not. A threat had been made. The United States had to react."

But why was the alert taken to its global nuclear and conventional extreme? Two simple reasons stand out above all others. The secretary of state wanted to do exactly what the Russians were requesting—save the Third Army—but without appearing to capitulate to Soviet threats. The alert achieved this goal. Second, in a dangerous situation where time was of the essence, Washington considered it far safer to err greatly on the side of overreaction than to falter slightly on the side of inadequacy.

The weaker side in a crisis may actually be in a better position to control events.

The day after the alert was put into effect, it was widely speculated in the United States that the president had manipulated the American response to distract public attention away from the deepening Watergate scandal. (Columnist James Reston went so far as to suggest that "a crisis a day keeps impeachment away.") It is now clear, however, that Nixon's role in the decision to alert American forces was minimal. The president empowered Kissinger to act on his behalf relatively early in the crisis and did not ratify the military alert until at least three hours after U.S. forces had been informed of the decision. This is both frightening and reassuring: frightening because the elected leader of the American people should take direct responsibility for such an important and dangerous decision, reassuring because the president, then under the pressure of the Watergate scandal, seemed less than competent to make such a decision.

Yet it is likely that the atmosphere created by Watergate encouraged the participants in the NSC meeting to opt for a strong response, for the scandal must have increased their concern that America might appear

weak. Schlesinger underlined this in his press conference on October 26:

> I think that it was important in view of the circumstances that have raised a question or may have raised a question about the ability of the United States to react appropriately, firmly, and quickly, that this certainly scotched whatever myths that may have developed with regard to that possibility.

But the military alert was only one part of the signal that the United States sent to the Soviet Union. It was a very big stick, but the United States offered the Soviets a number of important carrots as well. On the morning of the 25th, Brezhnev received a message from Washington stressing that Soviet intervention in Egypt would be considered a violation of the summit agreement on the prevention of nuclear war and that the whole détente relationship was at stake. The note concluded: "You must know, however, that we could in no event accept unilateral action. . . . As I stated above, such action would produce incalculable consequences which would be in the interest of neither of our countries and which would end all we have striven so hard to achieve."

This was the first of a series of messages between Moscow and Washington on the 25th and 26th that resulted in an important compromise on the issue of superpower involvement in peacekeeping forces. The Soviets agreed to support the U.S.-sponsored Security Council Resolution 340, which excluded the superpowers from participating in the U.N. emergency force. In exchange, Washington agreed that both the Soviet Union and the United States would send a small number of observers to Egypt.

The Soviets' apparent surprise when the superpower crisis developed (both Brezhnev and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko were attending a meeting of the largely ceremonial World Peace Congress when American forces were put on alert) and the speed with which they accepted the compromise U.N. resolution suggests that they had intended their

message to be viewed as a signal of great concern rather than as a direct threat to intervene immediately.

While the American alert made unilateral Soviet intervention less attractive and the compromise made it less urgent, increased U.S. pressure on Israel eventually made it unnecessary. Although one can only speculate whether Kissinger explicitly told the Soviets he would stop any further Israeli military action, it is clear that Washington's pressure on Tel Aviv was substantial after Major General Ariel Sharon's forces surrounded the Third Army. Indeed, Moshe Dayan, then defense minister, has said that Kissinger told him the United States would not stop the Russians a second time and that the American secretary of state even threatened to save the Third Army with an American airdrop of supplies.

Moreover, if the Israelis had any doubts that continued fighting after the 22nd would affect the American airlift to Israel, they had none by the real end of the war. On the 28th, Dayan announced in the Knesset that the Americans had threatened to end the airlift unless the Third Army received food and water. Eventually, the Israelis relented. As a result, the Third Army and Sadat's prestige were saved by American diplomatic pressure, not by Soviet military intervention. The crisis was over, and Kissinger was ready to begin the process of postwar negotiations.

Avenues of Penetration

In his Oxford Union address on November 30, 1978, Nixon argued that the Soviets backed away from the brink on October 25 because they believed the American president had few qualms about using military force if necessary. Nixon may be correct, but his argument is not sufficient. Nixon's reputation for violent impulsiveness at most only reinforced what must have been the prevalent fear inside the Kremlin by October 25: A major Soviet intervention in Egypt would lead to American counterintervention in the Sinai or to retaliation of some other kind

elsewhere. In a truly dangerous crisis, fear can be both pervasive and persuasive; when the stakes are so high, just a little uncertainty produces extreme caution.

Nixon's emphasis on his personal reputation in deterring a Soviet intervention ignores a central fact: The United States does not need to prove to the Soviets that it will retaliate if they take aggressive military action; it is up to Moscow to prove to itself that Washington will not. While the practical implications of this lesson are ambiguous, it should not be forgotten that as long as military crisis decisions must be made in a kind of twilight, both superpowers are, quite rationally, afraid of the dark.

Brezhnev was also chary because Washington had more at stake on October 25 than did Moscow. The American position in the Middle East was vulnerable at the end of the war: The nightmare of an Arab oil embargo had come to life on October 18; America's ally had been taken by surprise by the October 6 attack and had suffered enormous initial losses; and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance was in dangerous disarray. Moreover, the avenues of future Soviet penetration into the area seemed open prior to Kissinger's step-by-step efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East. Because the United States had more to lose and because its back was against the wall, the U.S. threat to escalate the conflict appeared quite credible to the Kremlin.

The lesson here is ironic: The weaker side in a crisis may actually be in a better position to control events. However, this does not imply that the United States would want to occupy a weaker, but better, bargaining position in a crisis. After all, there is no certainty that the outcome of the crisis will be favorable to the weaker side or that such an outcome would outweigh the debilitating effect of the events that make up the crisis. Moreover, such a factor is easier to recognize in retrospect than to manipulate during a crisis.

Yet it must be stressed that neither superpower emerged victorious from the Yom Kip-

pur crisis. This should not be surprising. By the night of the 24th, the primary Soviet and American objective in the Middle East was the same: to stop the fighting before Israel scored an overwhelming victory. This common interest allowed the superpowers to stumble toward the same horizon. Had the United States supported Israel's apparent military plans, the crisis may have escalated further, with tragic consequences.

Both Kissinger and Brezhnev displayed considerable acumen as crisis managers. No irrevocable steps were taken, alternative courses of action were proposed to the adversary, and a mutually face-saving compromise was reached.

In two instances, however, Kissinger's actions contributed to the crisis. First, he promised something that he did not—and perhaps could not—deliver: immediate Israeli respect for the October 22 cease-fire. Second, he downplayed the importance of continued cease-fire violations in Tel Aviv, encouraging the Israelis to believe that they could get away with a few more days of fighting. Thus, while Kissinger has been faulted for overreacting on the 24th, a more pertinent criticism is that he responded inadequately to Israeli intransigence prior to the American alert. If he had communicated the importance of an immediate cease-fire to Tel Aviv, the crisis would never have occurred. Kissinger should have at least tried to assure Sadat that the United States would stop the Israeli advance. For it was the Egyptians' panicked request for superpower intervention that precipitated the crisis in the first place.

Ironically, although the Soviet threat to intervene in 1973 succeeded in saving the Third Army, it was Kissinger who really stopped the Israelis. The nuclear alert signaled American resolve in the Middle East, but Kissinger's threats to Tel Aviv demonstrated who held the cards for a future peace settlement. More important, the crisis of late October made it clear that the help Moscow can offer its Arab clients is limited to threats and warfare, while only the United States

can put more peaceful pressure on Israel, a point Sadat no doubt appreciated.

Crisis management is but a temporary objective; all is not well that ends well. Although no further escalation did occur in 1973, that crisis may have created a boy-who-cried-wolf problem for the United States. To appear credible in subsequent crises may require a higher and more dangerous level of military alert. Furthermore, there is always the risk that mistakes might occur when military forces increase their preparedness. As John Kennedy observed during the Cuban missile crisis, "there is always some son-of-a-bitch who doesn't get the word."

The hope that détente might defuse all potential crises between the superpowers has proved far too optimistic. Yet to cite the Yom Kippur crisis as ultimate proof that the relaxation of tensions is chimera is equally misleading. For the confrontation developed not only because détente was of limited effectiveness in cooling the Soviet-American rivalry, but also because neither side's allies were genuinely influenced by that relationship at all. The superpowers' ability to control the situation in the Middle East is not commensurate with their responsibility in the region. Each local actor made its decisions according to its own immediate needs, not according to its patron's global vision. Because escalation is often only a remote fear of a small state, an ally is sometimes willing to steer the Soviets and Americans onto the uncertain ice of nuclear confrontation. Paradoxically, once this danger developed—indeed perhaps because it developed—Israel and Egypt were forced to accept American and Soviet policy.

In the final analysis, the October 1973 crisis demonstrated the need for cooperation more than it did the poverty of détente. Yet it also suggested that for the superpowers there may be no exit. Even with détente, the United States must always strive to balance fear, hope, and resolve. Thus, the experience of the Yom Kippur alert should not engender confidence that future crises can be avoided, but extreme caution when they do occur.