

THE WHITE HOUSE

471

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telephone Conversation with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union

PARTICIPANTS: The President
President Mikhail Gorbachev
Nicholas Burns, NSC Staff (notetaker)

DATE, TIME January 18, 1991, 9:23-10:34 a.m.
AND PLACE The Oval Office

The President: Mikhail, how are you? (U)

President Gorbachev: George, good afternoon and greetings. This is not a simple time for both of us. (S)

The President: No, it is not. It is a very complicated time.

(S)

President Gorbachev: Yes, indeed. It is almost the end of the day in Moscow and getting dark. It is morning in Washington.

(S)

The President: Yes. It is 9:20 a.m. in the morning. (S)

President Gorbachev: Well, I would, of course, like to engage first in a discussion of the Persian Gulf situation. (S)

The President: I would be glad to fill you in from our end. I also welcome any thoughts from yours. (S)

President Gorbachev: First of all, I would like to say that our doubts, yours and mine, about Saddam Hussein have proven right. He is the kind of person against whom force is necessary. I have a full understanding of this burden to the nations of the world. Now, casualties have occurred and the situation is developing. We have to think about what to do next. (S)

The President: That is true. I hope we can all agree on full compliance with the UN resolutions. (S)

President Gorbachev: In my statement, I reaffirmed our position of principle. I said Saddam Hussein was to blame, and that war had become inevitable. I said it would be necessary for Iraq to leave Kuwait and comply with the UN resolutions. (S)

The President: I thought it was an outstanding statement. (S)

SECRET

Declassify on: OADR

DECLASSIFIED
PER E.O. 12958,
AS AMENDED

81 8/21/2009

President Gorbachev: Now that war is beginning, our number one priority should be to shorten it and make sure it does not spread. (S)

The President: I worry about that, too. When Saddam Hussein fired the missiles on Israel, he was trying from his side to make the war spread. (S)

President Gorbachev: Yes, and I think your position is good. Your advice to the Israelis was timely, appropriate and right. (S)

The President: We are trying to figure out what they might do. I hope it does not encourage the war to spread and draw others into it. (S)

President Gorbachev: Yes, indeed. I think this is precisely what Saddam Hussein wants to see. (S)

The President: We are worried about the Jordan equation, Mikhail. I want to know what you think about that. (S)

President Gorbachev: Mr. President, let me first share with you my thinking on further steps. (S)

The President: Please. I'd be delighted to hear them. (U)

President Gorbachev: First of all. Two days of powerful military action have moved the situation to a new phase. Saddam Hussein before that showed ambitious and threatening behavior and contempt for the U.S., UN and the USSR. Now we can speak of his political defeat. This is my first point. (S)

The second point is that with the enormous damage done, the irreparable damage to the military and industrial potential of Iraq, now we have a different Iraq. Any ambition to dictate its will in the region has no material basis. And I believe that an important victory has been achieved. That is a victory that is important for you domestically and important for the world. The aggressor has been taught a lesson. (S)

And I think that now, George, think about this. What is the purpose of continuing military action? The cost of bombing and air missions and participation of the land forces would mean many more casualties among the American forces and victims among the civilians in Iraq. I understand you don't want that, not only among American troops, but it would mean a major loss of life among civilians. (S)

The President: Exactly. I feel strongly about that. (S)

President Gorbachev: This is a very important statement. So now what can we have if the strikes continue, strikes against people. This military action could change the character of the war. And I don't underrate Saddam Hussein. He may still have some land military capability. (S)

SECRET

Based on all this today, in the middle of the day, I instructed my Ambassador in Baghdad to get in touch with Saddam Hussein and to ask him a question. My question is: if there is a pause in the full development of the military option, would he be able to state he would leave Kuwait. I asked for an urgent answer. In the meantime, I wanted to inform you about that contact. (S)

And my question to you is: if he agrees, although it is difficult to suppose he will do that, would you be ready to pause in the military option. And if Saddam Hussein rejects this proposal, I'll publicly speak about this. People have to know with whom they are dealing. (S)

And I also know you are worried about the possibility if Saddam Hussein leaves Kuwait peacefully, that he will have a tremendous military potential to destabilize the Middle East. But that has been taken care of. And in that new situation, we could continue UN Security Council cooperation and new security structures in the Middle East. This is what I was going to say. (S)

The President: Let me respond in some detail. In the first place, we have no evidence that he'll accept this offer of yours. Secondly, the concept that the military superiority that has given him arrogance in the Middle East has been resolved is not correct. A lot of his military power is still intact. He could continue to dominate his neighbors. (S)

What we would have to consider carefully at any time in the cessation of hostilities is the following: would the cessation of hostilities make a hero of him in the Middle East? At this juncture, his having attacked Israel and the continued use of the SCUDs and the Republican Guards make me feel he could claim victory out of the rubble of defeat. (S)

There is another point that would concern me. The coalition forces at this juncture are highly motivated, including the Arab participants. They would feel a cessation now would clearly be a victory for Saddam Hussein. It would put them in an extraordinarily weakened position in my view. They would see this as the one thing we said we wouldn't do--compromise. They would see Saddam Hussein, though weakened, with a military still intact, his ground forces in particular. (S)

So I think this effort may be premature. But, Mikhail, let me add a personal note. I continually worry about the loss of life you talked about in your message today. But we have been so far very lucky in that category. By that I mean we are targeting carefully and going the extra mile to protect against the very attack he launched on Israel yesterday. The targeting specifically excludes religious sites, mosques and damage to hospitals, schools and population centers. It has been precise and our analysis so far is that we've been successful in that regard. (S)

But, so nobody likes this. There is no joy in what is happening at all. I think we're now in a position to solve this problem.

SECRET

But I must say I really feel we have got to stay the course until it is abundantly clear that he will unilaterally and without concessions or conciliation leave Kuwait. (S)

I would be interested in what your Ambassador learns. I hate to hold out hope to Saddam Hussein and would not want to hold out hope that talks or negotiations about this would satisfy the coalition. And what he did yesterday in attacking Israel with city-busting weapons, that complicates things. If the fighting stopped this minute, he would say the attack on Israel brought the war to an end and made him victorious. That would put an end to the new world order you and I want. He would march out and say that striking Israel had brought the war to an end. Instead of being the humiliated braggart, he would be the victor, and others would see that. I am thinking of Egypt when I say that. (S)

That is my thinking. I think it accurately reflects the thinking of the coalition partners, but I haven't talked to them about what you have mentioned to me, obviously. I think the other coalition partners would agree with what I've told you here today. (S)

None of us want to see a vacuum in Iraq, an Iraq so weak and impotent that it would be destabilizing. So weak that it would be subject to aggression from its neighbors. We don't want to see that and we would work with you and others to stop that. In other words, we don't want to wipe out Iraq. So, I would-- (S)

President Gorbachev: If you are through then a few words from me. (S)

The President: I welcome your thoughtfulness and your concerns. I encourage you to stay in touch. I thought you were entitled to a frank assessment of the situation. Please go ahead. (S)

President Gorbachev: First of all, I would repeat. We will be with you to the very end, committed to the end. We will maintain the same position on the Saddam Hussein regime. The fact that hostilities have begun, the blame is fully with Saddam Hussein. (S)

The difference between us is on the following. You believe Iraq retains a significant military power that could threaten its neighbors, and that it will not comply with the UN resolutions. But, please, George, consider the central point I am making in this conversation. The first phase of action against Saddam Hussein was fully justified and has brought practical, strategic results. We, you and I, agree that if Saddam Hussein had left Kuwait a week ago, talks could have begun. But first he had to leave. If he were to leave Kuwait now, he would be weakened, rendered powerless for many years to come. It would be a lesson to everyone. (S)

SECRET

(At this point, the call was disconnected. It resumed ten minutes later.)

The President: Mikhail, we were cut off some time ago.
(S)

President Gorbachev: George, I thought communications was our problem, but it seems the U.S. has problems too. (S)

The President: Always, always. We can put a man on the moon but can't talk to Moscow. (S)

President Gorbachev: Still, yours is better than ours. (S)

The President: I'm not so sure about that. (U)

President Gorbachev: What was the last point I was making? (S)

The President: You said we agreed if Saddam left completely, the talks could begin and he would be weakened. That was the last thing I heard. (S)

President Gorbachev: There are two possibilities. One, I assume that the UN resolutions are complied with. The other possibility is to use all forces and begin a new phase in hostilities. That means a greater loss of life. We must think of the long-term political consequences. We must think of the loss of opportunity. (S)

So, George, my concern is that we make sure not to lose the opportunity now that we have attained strategic objectives. We have taught a lesson to the aggressor. Our new U.S.-Soviet cooperation, the spirit of our common values, means it is important to do the right thing. Stop in this phase. I am thinking about the casualties of U.S. forces and the loss of life among civilians and Iraqi soldiers. (S)

The President: I understand your concerns and share them. But I worry that if we stop short of full compliance with the UN resolutions, this man will pull victory out of the jaws of defeat. That would be a terrible example for the future. I agree with you on bloodshed. But I don't think our objectives have been achieved yet. There is no evidence he will comply with the UN resolutions right now. He could do that this very minute if he wanted to. (S)

President Gorbachev: George, well I think there is no difference between you and me on the need for compliance. There is no doubt that is valid and in effect. And there are no cracks, there must be no cracks on this. And at the same time, I think that the President of the U.S. and the President of the USSR must think of how to get out of this situation. This new phase brings me to the conclusion that we can take steps, all of us. (S)

The President: Let's stay in touch. I would be interested in what your Ambassador hears. We cannot end up in negotiations or

SECRET

conciliation. Please think what the attack on Israel last night did to this equation. Its a whole new dimension. (S)

I saw the Soviet statement and thought it was good. Let's think about it. Stay in touch. I agree with you that the Presidents of the U.S. and USSR must find a way to resolve this thing. (S)

One point of possible difference. Maybe you think he has been pounded more than we think. We think he still has a powerful military component in place. (S)

President Gorbachev: George, I think we have had a timely discussion. I hope we'll talk again soon. (S)

The President: I appreciate the call. Let me add in conclusion that I really empathize with you this week. Let me simply reiterate what we said to your very able new Foreign Minister, Mr. Bessmertnykh. We are so hopeful the Baltic situation can be resolved peacefully. It would really complicate things. (S)

We want to clear up CFE and START and go the extra mile on those two. We've not lost interest in either of them. (S)

President Gorbachev: I take note of this very important point. I would like to shake your hand and hope to talk soon. (S)

The President: The phone lines are open. Call day or night. It doesn't matter what time of day it is. Good luck to you on this and all the problems you have at home. (S)

President Gorbachev: Thank you. I shake your hand. (S)

The President: Good-bye. (U)

-- End of Conversation --

SECRET