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Diplomatic tit-for-tat game may never be the same

WASHINGTON — In the foreign service, the term "PNG" is used as both noun and verb: The State Department yesterday declared five Soviet diplomats PNG. In the vernacular, it PNG'd them.

PNG stands for persona non grata. It describes someone who is not welcome in the host country, whose diplomatic status will no longer be recognized.

What the department did was kick the Soviet officials out of this country for conduct "incompatible with their official status." In the vernacular, they were spies.

The United States and the Soviet Union have been playing the PNG game for many years, sticking to well understood rules. Those rules could be summed up in another well known neo-Latin phrase, tit for tat.

But now our side has torn up the rules, and the game may never be the same:

Yesterday, the State Department also told an additional 50 Soviet diplomatic personnel to go home without the formality of being declared PNG. And that move came after yet another 25 were sent home from their jobs with the United Nations in New York.

Seldom in the past has either side ordered home diplomatic personnel en masse unless they were tied to some newly uncovered spy ring or operation — a specific list of people bounced for specific offenses.

I cannot get into this field without retelling how in 1963, I woke up one day in Moscow to find that 10 of my friends and acquaintances in the Anglo-American community were PNG'd at once.

The KGB had broken the Oleg Penkovsky case, the most successful known Western penetration of Moscow's secrets since the Cold War began. Overnight, diplomats allegedly linked to Penkovsky were sent home.

Greville Wynne, the British businessman who was Penkovsky's chief contact, had no diplomatic immunity, so he was tried and sent to prison. Penkovsky himself, who had passed data that enabled U.S. planes to spot Soviet missiles being erected in Cuba, was convicted and executed.

Among other things, Penkovsky was accused of smuggling super-secret microfilm by enclosing it in chocolates he offered to the child of my British neighbors, the Chisholms. He slipped it to the boy as he played with his mother watching at a playground just around our corner.

For a while, our tight little Western community was bemused by the very idea that that nice Janet Chisholm and her husband, Rory, the British consul, could have been a key link in the Penkovsky chain. But we knew very well that any man or woman at the embassy might have been doing such double duty.

So indeed we assume that most Soviet citizens on official business abroad are intelligence agents under cover. Each side has tolerated these facts of life while occasionally responding sharply when its adversary gets too aggressive — or gets

caught.

In routine practice, each time either side sends a spy or two home, the other side responds the same way. But through the years, this informal rule grandfathered in a heavy Soviet advantage, with many more Soviet diplomats assigned to Washington than we were allowed in Moscow. Not only that, but Moscow sent a huge contingent to work at the United Nations.

This imbalance has annoyed U.S. officials through the whole post-World War II era, but in the interest of civil relations they never forced a change. They went along playing tit for tat, as with the PNG'd five sent home yesterday. Those were in response to five Americans sent home from Moscow, which were in response to the 25 Soviets sent home from the United Nations.

Through all the earlier passing salvos, the basic lopsidedness of the equation remained: The Soviets had about 50 more personnel here and in their San Francisco consulate than the United States has in Moscow and its Leningrad consulate. With yesterday's order, the administration has moved to correct that situation in one sudden sweep.

Speculation about why it stepped so boldly at this moment runs in three directions:

1. Still working with disclosures from defector-redefector Vitaly Yurchenko, U.S. authorities may indeed have uncovered a major Soviet intelligence operation, which will come to light gradually.

2. More likely, the White House wants to show the Kremlin that despite rushing close to questionable agreements in Iceland, it has not softened its basic anti-Soviet stance. That would buttress a tough U.S. negotiating posture as arms talks proceed at Geneva, Switzerland.

3. Still more likely, Mr. Reagan's advisers have noted that opinion polls since the Iceland meeting give him high ratings for not backing down on his Strategic Defense Initiative. Strong anti-communist gestures almost always play well with the electorate, so with elections two weeks away, the administration decided to take this long-overdue step at a time when it might boost Mr. Reagan's efforts to hold control of the Senate.

The only certainty is that though the rules have been scrapped, the game goes on. There will be more tit for tat. Count on it.