



The President's Daily Brief

December 29, 1975

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FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

CHINA-USSR

Amicable Chinese handling of the release on Saturday of three Soviet helicopter crewmen is startling, given the hitherto sour state of Sino-Soviet relations and the bitterness the helicopter incident initially caused on both sides.

The Chinese gesture is the most conciliatory move Peking has made toward Moscow since Premier Kosygin was briefly invited to China in 1969.

The Soviet crewmen had been held incommunicado since the helicopter went down in northwestern China in March 1974. The announcement of the release Saturday stated that Chinese public security forces had concluded, following an investigation, that the border intrusion had been unintentional.

Peking had initially charged that the Soviet crew was engaged in an espionage mission. Despite Soviet efforts to gain the crew's release through diplomatic pressure, propaganda, and threats to retaliate, the Chinese maintained a stony silence in public from the beginning while inspiring diplomatic rumors that the crewmen would be brought to trial.

The description in the announcement of the helicopter as an "armed reconnaissance" model may have been designed to justify the lengthy detention of the crew.

In an especially telling gesture, a senior Chinese Foreign Ministry official gave a dinner for the Soviet airmen before their release. Peking had never before accorded such treatment to foreign nationals who had been detained for any reason.

The release appears to be an important symbolic act, but the reasons for its timing are not yet clear. The long Chinese public silence on the helicopter affair suggests that handling of the matter may have been a contentious issue in Peking which has only now been resolved.

There have been muffled indications for nearly two years that some fairly important people in China may have been arguing in favor of a less abrasive policy toward Moscow, presumably on the grounds that

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China's current approach is too dangerous. There have been no recent signs, however, that such a debate has come to a head, and in fact exchanges between Peking and Moscow in the past six or eight months have been particularly sharp.

The Chinese have also indicated concern in the past several months that the US has not been properly standing up to the Soviets. The implication is that putative US passivity leaves the Chinese increasingly exposed. Recent action on Angola by the US Senate undoubtedly has further heightened Chinese concern on this matter.

In addition, Peking's move may be intended as a signal to the US that Sino-US rapprochement does not indefinitely preclude some improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. The Chinese may be particularly anxious to make this point at a time when their attacks on detente and SALT seem to be having little or no effect on Washington.

At a minimum the Chinese probably also hope to complicate Moscow's attempts to use the anti-China theme in connection with its efforts to convene an international communist conference in 1976; they may also hope to complicate Secretary Kissinger's dialogue with Moscow.

The release of the helicopter crew removes an important irritant in Sino-Soviet relations, but a host of others remain. A senior Soviet Foreign Ministry official publicly revealed two weeks ago, for example, that the Chinese hold three other citizens who, he claimed, had strayed across the border.

Chinese propaganda, moreover, immediately before and after the announcement of the release, has continued to attack the USSR's "archcriminal" activities in Angola and "expansionist" foreign policy.

Moscow, which from the beginning has maintained that the March 1974 border violation was unintentional, has merely issued a Tass announcement reporting the release of the "illegally detained" crewmen. According to a press report, the Soviet ambassador in China described the Chinese action as a "complete mystery."

The Soviets undoubtedly calculate that as long as he lives, Chairman Mao is unlikely to acquiesce for long in any Chinese move significantly to lower tensions with Moscow.

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OAU - ANGOLA - SOUTH AFRICA - ZAIRE

The summit of the Organization of African Unity that opens in Addis Ababa on January 10 to consider Angola increases South Africa's dilemma as to its involvement there.

Pretoria has decided "in principle" to withdraw South African forces soon, preferably before the summit [redacted] The decision presumably is intended to permit the National Front for the Liberation of Angola and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola to deny at the summit that South African troops are assisting them.

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South Africa set no specific date for withdrawal. Pretoria is aware that its aid is a political liability to the two groups but also recognizes that a precipitous withdrawal would seriously reduce their military capabilities.

Pretoria hopes that military gains can be made before the summit that will give the National Front and the National Union a political advantage over the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. South Africa's hesitation on setting a date for withdrawal suggests that the decision to leave may be reviewed and could be reversed.

Zambian President Kaunda shares Pretoria's predicament over assisting the Front and the Union.

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With Angola's two rival regimes both trying to line up support before the summit convenes, it is not clear how OAU members would react to a South African announcement of withdrawal. Two more governments--Ghana and Burundi--last week recognized the Luanda-based Popular Movement under Agostinho Neto. This raises to 17 the number supporting the Movement within the 46-member OAU. Both Ghana and Burundi oppose Soviet involvement in Angola but, like Nigeria and others, they recognized the Popular Movement because of South African support for the National Front and the National Union.

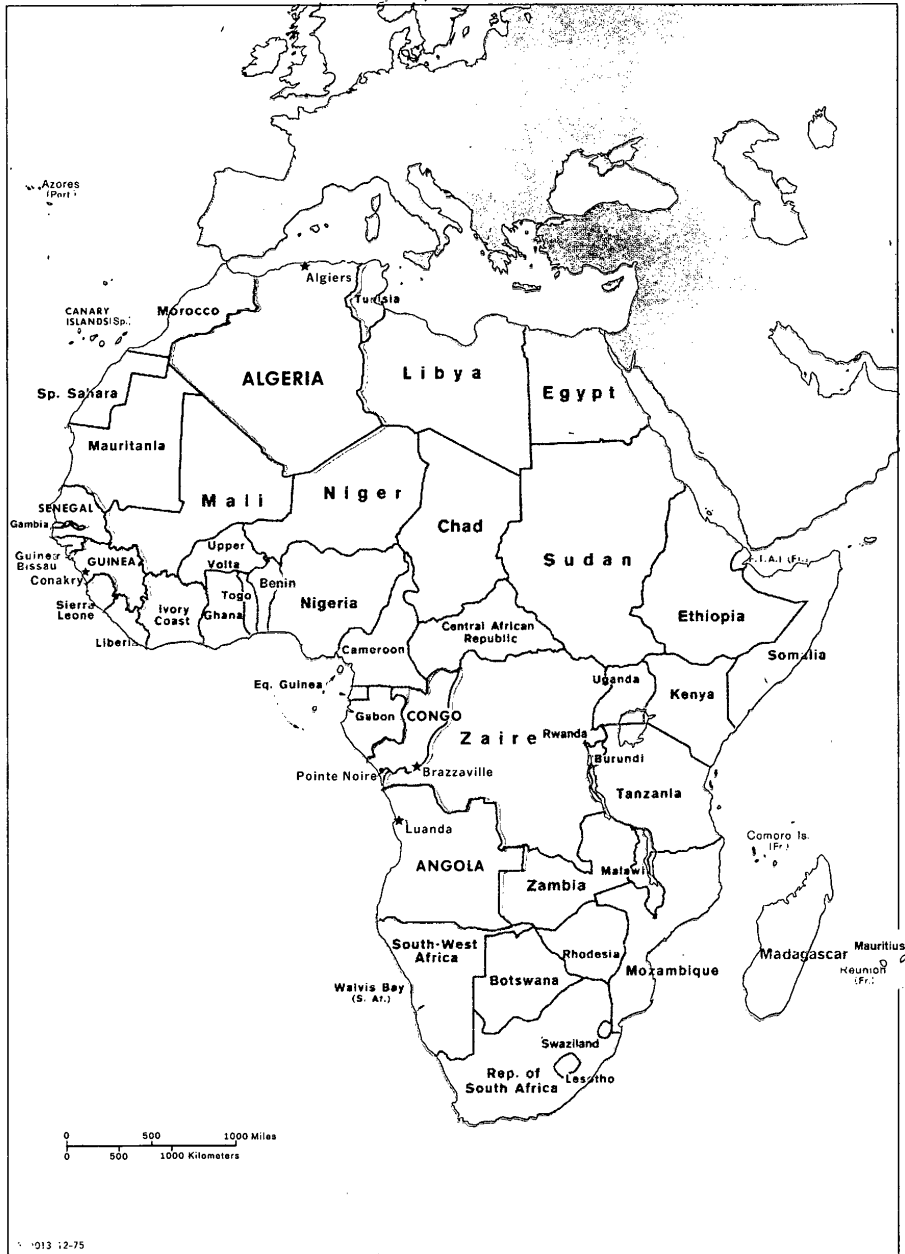
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Kaunda says he has reached agreement with Tanzanian President Nyerere and Mozambican President Machel--both of whom recognize the Popular Movement--on proposals that would avoid a serious split within the OAU and enable it to work for a political settlement in Angola.

Kaunda claims the three governments will propose that the OAU:

- condemn the presence of South African troops in Angola;
- demand the withdrawal of all foreign military personnel;
- stop further supplies to the parties involved in the fighting;
- call for a cease-fire;
- call for a government of national unity.

AFRICA



NOTES

The Soviet Kotlin-class destroyer approaching Conakry, Guinea, could enter that port today.

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The destroyer and the tanker accompanying it were detected Saturday off the coast of Senegal. The Soviet landing ship that has been in the vicinity of Pointe Noire, Congo, remains on station. It was located yesterday about 300 miles off the coast of northern Angola. The tanker that refueled it on Friday is returning to Conakry.

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The holiday lull in fighting in Lebanon continued over the weekend, partly because of freezing rains and high winds.

Sniping and occasional heavy exchanges of fire in parts of Beirut continued to make the streets unsafe in the capital, but Tripoli and Zahlah were quiet. Radio Beirut announced Saturday that Prime Minister Karami's coordination committee--which includes representatives of the warring factions as well as Lebanese security officials--had agreed on a timetable for enforcing the cease-fire over the next few days. There is no indication that the latest agreement will be any more effective than other truces worked out over the past eight months.

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Thailand may be preparing to reopen its border with Laos.

An official of the Thai Foreign Ministry announced late last week that the border would be "temporarily" opened today to facilitate transportation of essential goods to foreign embassies in Vientiane. The official said he expected Thai Prime Minister Khukrit Pramot to order the entire border reopened shortly. An "informed source" in Vientiane, however, today told the French Press Agency that the temporary opening will be delayed a week.

The Thai announcement could be a trial balloon. Khukrit may well decide to withhold a final decision on reopening the entire border until he has strong public support for such a move.

The Vietnamese communists have increased their propaganda attacks against Bangkok's "unilateral" closing of the border and its "economic blockade" of Laos. A statement by the North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry charged on December 24 that the Thai administration has "continuously colluded with US imperialists" against the Lao people.

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