

March 1, 1978

**From the Journal of A.F. Dobrynin, 'Record of a
Conversation with Z. Brzezinski, Assistant to the
President of the US for National Security, 1 March
1978'**

Citation:

"From the Journal of A.F. Dobrynin, 'Record of a Conversation with Z. Brzezinski, Assistant to the President of the US for National Security, 1 March 1978'", March 1, 1978, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (AVP RF), f. 0129, op. 62, p. 474, d. 5, ll. 132-134. Contributed by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/301455>

Summary:

In this March 1978 conversation, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski discussed rising US concerns over Soviet and Cuban military involvement in the Horn of Africa, particularly its perceived threat to Western oil routes and the stability of Saudi Arabia. Dobrynin rejected Brzezinski's fears as exaggerated, reiterating that the conflict stemmed from Somali aggression and emphasizing that the Soviet presence supported Ethiopia's defense. The meeting ended with both sides restating their entrenched positions, with the US seeking assurances of de-escalation and Soviet withdrawal, which Dobrynin declined to provide.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Blavatnik Family Foundation

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Soviet Embassy in the US
TOP SECRET

Washington
18 March 1978

from the journal
of A.F. Dobrynin

RECORD OF A CONVERSATION

with Z. Brzezinski, Assistant to the President of the US for National Security
1 March 1978

During the meeting Brzezinski again began a discussion about events in the Horn of Africa.

Brzezinski, getting angry, tried to present this matter in such a way that the events surrounding the Somali-Ethiopian conflict could play the same negative role in American-Soviet relations in 1978 as the events around Angola played in 1976 at the height of the presidential election campaign. At the same time, he seemed to draw a parallel between these two periods in terms of the domestic political situation in the United States, noting that this year is also the year of an election campaign for the American Congress.

He was firmly told in response to this that the hype around the conflict in the Horn of Africa is clearly being deliberately inflated in the United States, unfortunately, also by the Administration itself, at the same time as its task, it would seem, should be to do just the opposite - to prevent this or another purely local problem from turning into a factor that could negatively affect Soviet-American relations in one way or another.

I again outlined to Brzezinski our principled position on this question, when doing this emphasizing that the essence of the matter is not in any actions of the USSR, but in the fact that Somalia forcibly seized part of Ethiopian territory and continues to occupy it. It is in the cessation of Somali aggression, the end of its support from the West, including the United States, and the withdrawal of Somali troops from the Ogaden that lies the solution to this problem, which the United States does not want to unconditionally acknowledge, trying to impose its terms of conflict resolution on Ethiopia in advance.

The essence of all Brzezinski's statements stubbornly concentrated on one thing: the expression of "Carter's growing concern" about the expansion of foreign military influence in Africa, Soviet and Cuban. He repeatedly returned to the theme that the military presence in Ethiopia of the Soviet Union and especially of the Cubans (with the prospect of [their] strong introduction there) poses a threat to Western interests in terms of the security of oil communications between the Middle East and the United States and Western Europe, which may be "cut". Brzezinski returned to the topic of this "threat" several times.

Then I asked my interlocutor how he practically imagined the Soviet Union's course of action in order to "cut off the oil communications" of the West, the threat of which they are now so fond of talking about in the United States. Capture or sinking of American tankers? But this would be a direct act of war. And if things, God forbid, came to the point of military clashes between us, then what significance would a few oil tankers have for the overall state of affairs? Is it possible, I asked, that the White House really thinks in such categories, which smack of 19th-century doctrines, but are completely unsuitable for modern conditions?

Brzezinski was somewhat confused, but then said that the White House also did not really believe in such a scenario of events, but that, they say, unfortunately, such simplified concepts are widely current in the United States, in particular in Congress, and in the mass media.

But, to put it bluntly, he went on to say that we in the White House seriously fear one thing: the Cubans, with their revolutionary spirit and emotional impulse to provide all possible assistance in situations that they consider revolutionary, will be located near the weakest link in the world from the point of view of Western interests, in the Middle East, namely Saudi Arabia. This country has neither a significant army nor a mature modern political system. And it is already "surrounded" by countries with radical regimes such as Iraq and South Yemen. The appearance of Cubans in Ethiopia reinforces this "encirclement."

The US, Brzezinski said, could not allow the loss of Saudi Arabia because of its oil and therefore looks with concern at anything that could lead to the loss of this country. This is why the Soviet, and especially Cuban, military presence in the area ("Angola was less important to us in this sense") is causing the US government special concern. "We don't officially talk publicly about this reason, but we think about it all the time."

From Brzezinski's further statements during the conversation, it was clear that the United States would like to receive some assurances that there will be a peaceful settlement of the Somali-Ethiopian conflict with the beginning and progress of the process and also, to some extent (even if unofficially, outside of the agreement), that some kind of agreement or mutual understanding were reached that Cuban troops would leave Ethiopia, and the Soviet military presence would be reduced. This is essentially the main goal of American diplomacy now.

I dismissed my interlocutor's arguments about the Cubans by saying that Cuba is a sovereign country, and we are not authorized to enter into any discussion of its position. As concerns the Soviet military presence, it is determined by the fact of aggression against Ethiopia, which itself turned to us for assistance in repelling this aggression.

The conversation ended with a repetition and confirmation of the respective known positions of both sides.

SOVIET AMBASSADOR IN THE US
(A. DOBRYNIN)