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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

SEPTEMBER 10, 2018

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11.09.2018

Trump's Psyche and the Threat of Force



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The frightening letter from a senior official in the Trump administration that appeared in the *New York Times* begs questions about the possibility of additional “misguided impulses” from the President that cannot be blocked. Unfortunately, there is a terrible precedent from the Nixon administration in 1973 during the October War, when President Richard M. Nixon was incapacitated and national security adviser Henry A. Kissinger recklessly and unnecessarily upgraded the nuclear alert to Defense Condition III.

Let’s review the bidding: the month of October occasioned the surprise Egyptian-Syrian attack against Israel as well as increasing evidence that President Nixon had obstructed justice in his effort to hide the crimes of Watergate. Nixon was preoccupied with the threat of impeachment, according to both Kissinger and the president’s military aide, General Alexander Haig.

In his memoirs, Kissinger maintained that he needed to send a significant military signal to the Soviet Union because of a “threatening” note from Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev during the late stages of the war. In fact, the note was neither a threat nor an ultimatum, and was similar to Brezhnev’s note to the Johnson administration during the Six-Day War of 1967. In 1967 and 1973, the Soviets were restrained and trying to get an end to the fighting, particularly in view of Israeli violations of a cease-fire that Washington and Moscow had orchestrated.

Moreover, there was no intelligence information in 1973 that indicated the Soviets were



prepared to intervene militarily in the Middle East.

The Soviet

airlift to Egypt had stopped, and the evidence of nuclear materials on Soviet naval ships coming through the Dardanelles to the Mediterranean Sea was based on an erratic naval collection system that typically and inaccurately recorded radiation from Soviet ships. The Soviet airborne divisions were not on alert, and Moscow had never introduced its airborne forces into noncontiguous areas.

Nevertheless, Kissinger called an National Security Council meeting on October 24, 1973 that ultimately declared DefConIII. The National Security Act of 1947, however, stipulates that only the president or the vice president may chair an NSC meeting. This meeting was held close to midnight, and General Haig refused to awaken President Nixon, who seemed to be too distraught to participate in high-stakes foreign policy decision making. (A new vice president had been named—Gerald Ford—to replace Spiro Agnew, but he had not been confirmed and therefore could not attend an NSC meeting.)

If neither the president nor the vice president is available, the 1947 Act stipulates that the president has to authorize in writing who will be in charge. There is no record of such a letter in 1973. Kissinger ran the meeting in his capacity then as Secretary of State and National Security Adviser, and he was the only one present who believed the Soviets were prepared to intervene and that a heightened military alert was called for.

The other key participants (Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, CIA Director William Colby, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Thomas Moorer) were opposed.

Kissinger's reckless use of a nuclear alert during the October War was typical of his diplomatic jujitsu in other Third World imbroglios. He wanted to threaten the Soviets over a Cuban affair in 1970, but Nixon overruled him. Kissinger wanted a "showdown" with the Soviets over the Indian-Pakistan War in 1971, but Nixon again ignored him. Kissinger's unnecessary Christmas bombing of North Vietnam was unconscionable.

Kissinger conducted a costly crew rescue in Southeast Asia in 1975 in order to create "credibility" for a new president, Gerald Ford. We were fortunate in 1973 because the Soviets showed restraint.

So let's fast forward to 2018. We have a president who is "impetuous, adversarial, petty, and ineffective," according to a senior official in his administration. We also have a president who is facing a serious threat to his leadership that could very well lead to impeachment. And we have a national security adviser, John Bolton, who is more impetuous and adversarial than any of his recent predecessors. So far our general officers in the Trump administration have been the "adults in the room," but can we count on a chief of staff and the Secretary of Defense to block the reckless actions of a president of the United States who believes that the use of military force may be the only solution to his political crisis.