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To a Historian, the Breakdown of U.S.-Russian Relations Looks Eerily Familiar

It took Mikhail Gorbachev to break this cycle of fear and distrust back then. Who or what will it take today?

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Jimmy Carter and Leonid Brezhnev **Eduard Pesov / TASS**

Moscow's relations with Washington are at their lowest point since the height of the Cold War.

Dialogue has stalled, and neither side is seriously considering engagement, preferring instead to trade insults from afar.

With the U.S. intelligence community concluding that Russia once again attempted to interfere in the American elections, bilateral relations are set to worsen even further without any scope for future improvement. President Joe Biden agreed in an interview that Russian

President Vladimir Putin is a "killer," adding that he will "pay" for allegedly interfering in the 2020 presidential election.

There is a sense of déjà vu here. There are curious parallels between today's deadlock and the collapse of détente in the 1970s.

True, communism is long dead, and Russia is not the existential threat the Soviets were in their time. But many other aspects of the relationship — including the seeming lack of understanding by each side of what the other is doing — rhyme through the years. To see how, it is useful to go back to Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev who, were he alive today, would have appreciated Putin's predicament.

The 1976 U.S. presidential election really got on Brezhnev's nerves.

The Republicans were awful, he thought.

President Gerald Ford succumbed to anti-Soviet rhetoric, no doubt to protect himself from the fiery Republican right represented by his chief rival Ronald Reagan.

Brezhnev had sought to build a partnership with Ford after Richard Nixon's downfall, but the incumbent proved too weak politically to invest in détente with the U.S.S.R.

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In 1975, they met at the Helsinki summit to inaugurate what seemed like a new era in Soviet-U.S. relations, but that new era proved painfully short lived. By 1976, Ford had become useless as far as the Soviets were concerned; they were certainly not invested in his future.

But the Democratic contender, Jimmy Carter, was hardly any better. He too lashed out against the Soviets during his election campaign over their abuse of human rights. All that annoyed the Soviet leader no end.

He was partially reassured, however, by American go-betweens — people like former New York governor Averell Harriman and business magnate Armand Hammer, who told Brezhnev that Carter's human rights rhetoric was just that, rhetoric, and that "after the election, much of what is being said now, will be forgotten."

Brezhnev hunkered down, waiting for election day. Having to choose between two ills, he was increasingly inclined toward Carter. What if his anti-Soviet talk really was just electoral blabber of no consequence?

Brezhnev was therefore quite disappointed when, upon assuming office, Carter doubled down on his human rights agenda.

He famously wrote a letter to Soviet dissident and nuclear scientist Andrei Sakharov and received another dissident, the exiled Vladimir Bukovsky, in the White House. The general secretary was scandalized by what he called American meddling in Soviet internal affairs. In response, the Soviets unleashed a barrage of anti-Carter propaganda, alluding to America's own human rights failings, and of course U.S. support for various authoritarian regimes

around the world.

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Carter complained. Brezhnev was unmoved.

“If we had normal relations,” he said of the American president, “we would not treat him badly. Carter’s predecessors were not gold either, but Nixon met us halfway and we met him halfway. We had a meeting. Ford also met us halfway and we also met him halfway. Honestly, I don’t understand what Carter wants.”

This sense of bemusement characterized Moscow’s approach to the Carter administration for the following four years. On one level, the Soviets thought it was still possible to work toward strategic stability. Despite early deadlock, for instance, the two sides finally came to an agreement on limiting nuclear arms — the SALT-2 treaty. It was signed at the 1979 Vienna summit, which ended up being the only meeting between Brezhnev and Carter.

Yet on most other fronts relations continued to worsen, helped along by superpower frictions in Africa, Soviet presence in Cuba, a worsening nuclear arms race in Europe and of course the continued bickering over the Soviet human rights record. What especially irked the Soviets was Carter’s pivot to China, which contributed to the Soviet Union’s strategic encirclement. Moscow issued repeated warnings about the danger of flirting with Beijing.

“You (i.e. the West) may be in a euphoric mood now about China,” Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko complained in February 1979, “but the time will come when you will be shedding tears.”

It was this lamentable collapse in the Soviet-American relationship that served as the backdrop for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, which for its part triggered U.S economic sanctions, the American boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics and mounting tensions that would once again raise the specter of a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The aging Soviet leaders — first and foremost Brezhnev whose physical and mental health had precipitously deteriorated in the late 1970s — were deeply frustrated by the collapse of détente. Brezhnev had made better relations with the U.S. his personal priority in the early 1970s.

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He sought legitimacy through U.S. recognition of his role as the leader of a co-equal superpower. Instead, Carter lectured Brezhnev about human rights, while his successor Ronald Reagan proclaimed the “march of freedom and democracy, which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history.”

All of that was largely incomprehensible to the Soviets. They were always trying to understand whether this hostile rhetoric was for real, or just a part of America’s domestic political theatre. Unable to understand, they opted to wait. Brezhnev had hoped Ford would deliver —

he didn't.

He then pinned his hopes on Carter — Carter failed to come through. With Reagan, there really wasn't much hope to begin with, and not much left of the Soviet-U.S. relationship to salvage.

Both sides seemed locked in a holding pattern, and, in the meantime, tensions got worse and worse, and the prospect of war loomed larger and larger. It took Mikhail Gorbachev to break this cycle of fear and distrust.

Who or what will it take today?

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