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Ease Tensions in Europe: Allow Both Side's Generals to Know Each Other

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Mike Nichols
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ON MARCH 25, 1985, an American intelligence officer was gunned down in East Germany near the town of Ludwigslust. The officer, Maj. Arthur Nicholson, was in uniform, unarmed and pursuing a recognized mission. While the immediate details of his death have been reported by the Soviet and Western authorities, and the motive of the Soviet soldier involved remains in question, certain aspects of the incident are quite clear.

The mission of Maj. Nicholson's and his driver, Sgt. Jessie Schatz, was authorized by the U.S. command and at least understood by the Soviets. They traveled unescorted, carrying official passes issued by the Soviet high command in East Germany to a U.S. military vehicle bearing prominent U.S. flags on the front and rear license plates. There was no mistaking who they were and no deception can be imputed to their activities.

For almost 40 years the four principal wartime allies (United States, United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union) have found it useful to maintain official military liaison missions (MLM) in the areas originally designated as the postwar zones of occupation on either side of the Iron Curtain. The United States, United Kingdom and France maintain MLMs in East Germany (partnered for convenience in West Berlin) while the Soviets have theirs in Frankfurt, Baden-Baden and Bonn in the West. Separate, bilateral agreements between the Soviet high command at Wünsdorf and each of the three western military commands govern the establishment, purpose and status of the missions.

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The U.S.-Soviet agreement is known as the Huebner-Malinin Accord, named for the deputy commanders on each side who signed it in 1947. The essential of the document are the provisions which one might expect: housing, rations, privacy of communications, inviolability of property and fringe support, such as commissary and post exchange privileges. The agreement also circumscribes the activities of the missions in an intelligence sense, forbidding unauthorized entry into "places of disposition of military units, without escort or supervision." For practical purposes, both the Soviet and the American commands have been free to time tours independently of each other to verify permanent and temporary restriction. Successive American commanders have reinforced the spirit and letter of the accord by issuing instructions to our MLM to stay outside such Soviet-designated areas. In addition, American forces in West Germany operate under standing orders to report observed Soviet MLM violations of U.S.-designated restricted areas and, where possible, without the use of deadly force or otherwise endangering life, to detain the transgressors.

There are no specific sanctions authorized in the accord for violations of its provisions. However, the quasi-diplomatic status of the MLM would indicate that either commander might ask the other to verify permanent representatives should the officers evidence an uncooperative attitude toward the host command. Originally by implication, and since by practice, it is well understood that the host has a right of detention where violation is suspected. Also by implication, and in most cases by practice, it is understood that detained MLM officers will be courteously treated, that their persons and property will be respected and that they will be promptly returned to control of their own chief of mission.

In this context, it is not unlikely that Maj. Nicholson's death was a tragedy perpetrated by an ignorant and overzealous guard. It would be improper to assume premeditation on the Soviets' part without a great deal more evidence than we have now. Eastern totalitarian culture and immature impulse on the part of the guard probably had more to do with it than criminal intent.

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After the incident, Gen. Glenn K. Otis, commander in chief, U.S. Army, Europe, met with Gen. Mikhail M. Zaytsev, commander in chief, Group of Soviet Forces, Germany, in an attempt to secure assurances of no repetition of the event. Each commander had an interest in insuring the safety of his famous mission in the other's territory. Gen. Otis reported a degree of satisfaction after the meeting.

The most remarkable thing about this meeting was that the officers have never met before. They were virtual strangers to each other, although between them they controlled over half a million armed men, crowded into an area about the size of the state of Montana to what may be the most sensitive region of the world. Such communications as they had with one another were largely on unpleasant matters, such as alleged violations of the Huebner-Malinin Accord. There was no personal basis for understanding of one another's point of view, and no direct sense of the mutual atmosphere on the other side. One might almost characterize the situation as a tragedy waiting to happen.

Regrettably, this isolation has been at least as much the fault of the United States as of the U.S.S.R. Shortly after World War II, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower attempted to establish a personal basis for cooperation with the Soviet military by developing a friendship with Marshal Georgi Zhukov. He also authorized the initiation of American participation in a series of meetings of senior commanders with their Soviet counterparts. In 1973, Gen. Michael S. Davison, a predecessor of Gen. Otis, accepted an invitation of Gen. Zaytsev's predecessor, Gen. Ivanovsky, to visit the Soviet headquarters in East Germany. However, when he attempted to reciprocate, the request was denied by the Departments of State and Defense. Not until 1978 was a return engagement authorized. By that time, Gen. Davison had been succeeded by Gen. George S. Blanchard. Fortunately, Gen. Blanchard had been a corps commander under Gen. Davison and had accompanied him on his visit to Wünsdorf, East Germany.

Gen. Blanchard suggested that Gen. Ivanovsky bring his wife and a half dozen others to visit the headquarters at Heidelberg and some of the billeting and training areas in West Germany. The two generals determined from the outset that no political issues would be discussed, and both adhered closely to the point. Gen. Ivanovsky saw American mess halls, family quarters, newsstands and tank training ranges. Being an old tank officer, he was given an opportunity to drive an M60A3 tank and to fire the main gun. He was obviously proud of the two bulls eyes he scored (after a little coaching).

After that, he and Gen. Blanchard met at least five times before Gen. Blanchard retired. The two formed a personal relationship that worked to relax tensions between their staffs and to provide a background of mutual confidence. Such personal confidence did much to cushion the effects of thinkerchable incidents that would arise from time to time. Each commander understood that he could depend upon the other's exercise moderation and cool professional judgment in dealing with such problems, and each assiduously lived up to the other's expectations.

Unfortunately, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was the cause of a U.S. government decision to sever many contacts between American and Soviet worldwide. U.S. participation in the Olympics was canceled and representation at official military social functions was drastically reduced. Despite arguments that commander-to-commander exchanges in Europe had a value beyond mere social pleasantries, they went on ice in 1979.

Gen. Blanchard's successor, Gen. Frederick J. Kroesen, attempted to revive the exchanges, but found little interest or support in Washington. The best he was able to do during his entire tour was to arrange one "coincidental" meeting with the new Soviet commander, Gen. Zaytsev, shortly before his return to the United States. With that single exception, the personalities in command on either side of the border were essentially here incognito to one another at the time Maj. Nicholson was shot. There was virtually no bank of understanding, of respect or goodwill upon which either commander could draw. The American and Soviet armies facing each other in Germany had had little contact for almost six years. They shared only mutual ideological disdain for each other's cause.

None of this, of course, is to say that Maj. Nicholson's death could have been avoided. It was the act of a single sentry interpreting his duty as he saw it (as seems probable), it could have happened in any command climate. But it seems likely that the chances of such a tragic event would have been significantly less in an atmosphere of regular commander-to-commander exchange and regular meetings of the headquarters staffs with their opposite numbers. Certainly, if the Otis-Zaytsev meeting had value after the meeting, it could have been even more valuable before the incident.

The vast array of differences between American and Soviet governments, value systems and ideology create a chasm which is unlikely to be closed for generations. It is normal in the course of international relations for governments to see the severance of diplomatic contacts, or lesser measures of that sort, to convey displeasure with the behavior of others when they are in strong disagreement. Inevitably, such severances entail some degree of inconvenience for the initiating power, but often it is necessary to sustain inconvenience to score a telling point. Undoubtedly, the cancellation of U.S. participation in the Moscow Olympics is radio undercooked to the Soviets our dismay over their aggression in the south.

However, we appear to have mistaken solid substance for inconvenience. We treated the military-to-military contacts which took place under Gen. Blanchard and Ivanovsky as merely symbolic — more akin to participation in Olympic games than to a part of great power relationships. While the exchanges had become the source of many amusing (and sometimes instructive) anecdotes, they also had become an important link between the commands, highly conducive to the maintenance of peace.

Military-to-military contacts between senior officers of different nations, particularly uniformed ones, have a special quality not found in any other form of international intercourse. Military commanders hold in their hands "the final arguments of Kings." It is a mistake to closet the keepers of the "arguments" until there is no other way to settle disputes. It has been shown that U.S. and Soviet military commanders can develop professional bonds transcending political issues when it serves the interests of the soldiers of their commands. Properly coordinated, these bonds can contribute substantially to the maintenance of calmness and control, scarce commodities in times of turbulence and tension.

Fortunately, the value of these contacts has been recognized by President Reagan. In his speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg on May 8 he called for three specific steps in this area:

"First, that our two countries (United States and U.S.S.R.) make a regular practice of exchanging military observers at military exercises . . .

"Second . . . I am also convinced that the military leaders of our nations could benefit from more contact. I therefore propose that we institute regular, high-level contacts between Soviet and American military leaders to develop better understanding and to prevent potential tragedies from occurring . . . .

Third, "I believe a permanent military-to- communications link could serve a useful purpose in this important area of our relationship. It could be the channel for exchanging notifications and other information regarding routine military activities, thereby reducing the chances of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. And over time, it might evolve into a 'risk reduction' mechanism for rapid communication and exchange of data in times of crisis."

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