

# When Russia invaded Disneyland

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

After intense negotiations and a Soviet visit to Disneyland, the US and the USSR ratified an agreement that became known as IncSea. This 1971 accord built confidence between the navies of the US and the USSR.

## FULL TEXT

In Moscow this year, two groups of naval officers will raise their glasses and toast the 25th anniversary of an agreement that has significantly fostered a better understanding between the two nations' navies. "An Agreement between the Government of the United States and the Government of the Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Incidents on the High Seas and the Air Space Above Them," commonly known as IncSea, has stood the test of time, weathering such events as the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the Afghanistan invasion, the shootdown of Korean Airlines Flight 007, the hawkish attitude of the Reagan administration, and finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union itself.<sup>1</sup> With the shift away from an adversarial relationship, over the long term the continuing maturity of the relationship between the U.S. and Russian Federation Navies probably will negate the need for maintaining this confidence-building accord. In the short term, however, IncSea continues to serve as a component of a strengthening bilateral relationship between the two navies. Indeed, over the past few years, delegations from the two navies have negotiated a protocol to revise and expand the scope of the accord. That IncSea has endured can be attributed to the professionalism and the shared respect of those who go out on and over the high seas. However, credit must also be given to those who originally negotiated the accord.

### The Problem

Former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt called it "an extremely dangerous, but exhilarating game of chicken." In his book, *On Watch*, Zumwalt described an episode in the summer of 1962 in the Baltic, where as commanding officer of the USS Dewey (DDG-45), he tangled with a Riga-class frigate that harassed his larger guide-missile destroyer with a series of shouldering maneuvers. In a later interview, Zumwalt confided that he had authorization to collide with the Soviet. Fortunately, no metal was bent on this occasion.<sup>2</sup> During the first two decades after World War II, incidents such as this occurred only within proximity of the Soviet mainland. In the mid-1960s, however, the Soviet Navy challenged the U.S. Navy on a global scale. Soviet vessels disrupted U.S. carrier battle groups conducting flight and replenishment operations, aimed weapons, shot flares, blinded with searchlights, and maneuvered dangerously.<sup>3</sup> Warships of the U.S. fleet countered. In *Seapower of the State*, Admiral Sergei Gorshkov made similar observations about U.S. behavior and added: "Their planes have not only constantly accompanied Soviet ships in the open ocean, but have shadowed from impermissibly low, dangerous heights and distances."<sup>4</sup>

The American public became aware of the problem after a pair of incidents occurred in the Sea of Japan on 10 and 11 May 1967. The destroyer USS Walker (DD-517), operating as part of an antisubmarine warfare task force, collided with a Soviet destroyer that it had been shouldering away from the Task Group flagship USS Hornet (CV-12). Another collision occurred the following day with another Soviet destroyer. Both collisions were protested and

became a topic of heated debate in the House of Representatives, where Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford argued that the United States could not tolerate further incidents and proposed a review of options authorizing the Navy to fire when challenged in this manner.<sup>5</sup>

President Lyndon B. Johnson "deeply regretted" the incidents and considered it a matter of concern. The solution proposed by Ford, however, had dangerous implications. Another approach was selected. On 16 April 1968, the United States proposed to the Soviet Union that "Safety at Sea" discussions be held, an overture the Soviets promptly ignored.<sup>6</sup>

#### A Strange String of Events

"Nadya rushed into the pilots' compartment, screamed 'hijacking' and began to close the door. A shot rang out. Nadya fell and a man about 50 burst into the cabin. He had a sawed-off shotgun in his hands and shouted 'Turkey, Turkey.'" This is how Aeroflot copilot Suliko Shavidze described the first successful hijacking of a Soviet passenger aircraft. On 15 October 1970, a 48-year-old Lithuanian truck driver and his 19-year-old son forced the twin turboprop airliner to divert to the Turkish city of Trebizond. Tensions between Turkey and the Soviet Union heightened, as Turkey refused extradition requests and Turkish courts declared the hijacking a political offense that freed the perpetrators from criminal prosecution.<sup>7</sup>

Three days later, during this political storm, the commander of the U.S. Military Aid Mission to Turkey, General Edward C. D. Scherrer, along with Brigadier General Claude M. McQuarrie and Turkish Colonel Cevdat Denizli were flying toward a forward Turkish military installation when their U-8 Beechcraft aircraft flew into an actual storm. Buffeted by high winds and blinded by heavy cloud cover, pilot Major James P. Russell approached what he thought was the destination runway. He then landed in Leninakan in Soviet Armenia.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, the above two incidents had no connection. Yet Vasily Grubyakov, the Soviet Ambassador to Turkey, observed: "There are now two Russian murderers in Turkey and one Turkish Colonel in Russia. Both must be returned."<sup>9</sup>

The Soviet handling of the captured aircraft and passengers soured relations between the two superpowers. The Soviet media equated the incursion with the U-2 incident, and timely counselor access to the prisoners was denied. The U.S. government protested and boycotted October Revolution festivities. Finally, on 9 November, the Soviets indicated that the Americans and the Turk would be returned the following day.<sup>10</sup>

After the release, American Embassy Charge D'Affairs Boris H. Klosson met with Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative Georg M. Korniyenko to review the Scherrer incident. At the conclusion of the discussion, Korniyenko changed the topic and said "competent organs" within his country were prepared to accept the U.S. proposal to hold bilateral meetings on avoiding incidents at sea between the two countries. He further proposed that the meeting take place in Moscow in early 1971 and expected that a naval officer would head the Soviet delegation in the discussions.

Why did the Soviets choose to respond at this time? In a message to U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Klosson speculated that the Soviets may have desired ". . . to send a positive sign involving the military to help offset the negative effect of the Scherrer case, or the Ark Royal case may have bestirred on them." The Ark Royal case referred to a collision that occurred the previous day in the Mediterranean between the British carrier and a Soviet destroyer."

#### Preparing to Talk

The Americans were surprised, if not shocked, by the sudden Soviet decision to accept their long-standing offer. Consequently, the United States was not immediately prepared to table concrete proposals. How the United States developed its position and formulated its proposals would be the subject of a long, tedious interdepartmental review process.<sup>12</sup>

Who would be in charge? Secretary of State Rogers nominated his Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Richard T. Davies. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird countered with Under Secretary of the Navy John W. Warner, who had experience with the ongoing Law of the Sea negotiations. With the Soviet delegation to be headed by a naval officer, Rogers deferred to the Laird nomination.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger signed National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 119, directing an interdepartmental group to outline the issues, examine alternative U.S. proposals, and estimate probable Soviet positions. The State Department was charged with organizing this group, which included representatives from the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Council. Coordination of the group fell on State Department veteran Herbert S. Okun, who had served in Moscow during the Cuban Missile Crisis and had Naval War College experience.<sup>14</sup>

After the first meeting on 1 March 1971, it quickly became apparent that the formulation of the U.S. position would be no simple task. Throughout the month, Kissinger received and approved extension requests so that the group could further analyze the issues and then refine its recommendations. Inputs from fleet commanders and deputy chiefs of naval operations cautioned against positions that could affect submarine operations, intelligence collection activities, or a ship commander's prerogative to maneuver his ship in a prudent manner. Finally, the group met on 1 April and recommended that allied governments be kept informed of the proceedings and that the British receive a special briefing on the proposed talks. Work was to continue within the Department of Defense to study past incidents and gather all pertinent legal documents.<sup>15</sup>

The group's response was forwarded to President Richard Nixon via a Kissinger-led Senior Review Group. Nixon approved the group's findings and signed a National Security Decision Memorandum that directed the State and Defense Departments to notify the Soviets informally of the U.S. agreement to conduct talks, consult with NATO and other allies, brief the press and Congress, and then formally notify the Soviets of a preference to start talks prior to the summer break." The last action, however, did not occur until 5 July. Consequently, the Soviets could not accommodate the proposed timing of the talks. In late August, a convening date of 12 October was set.<sup>17</sup>

#### The October Talks

After an overnight flight across the Atlantic, the U.S. delegation landed in Copenhagen early on 11 October to board a Wiesbaden-based U.S. Air Force C-118 (markings removed) to make the final flight to Moscow. Stepping on board with Warner and Okun were Vice Admiral Harry L. Harty and seven other State and Defense Department officials. Captain Carlisle A. H. Trost, serving as aide to the under secretary, also boarded the aircraft bound for the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup>

Ronald J. Kurth served as a junior delegation member. The retired rear admiral and former Naval War College president recalled that the attitude among the group was "guarded."<sup>19</sup> No wonder. Prior to their departure, the delegations had received briefings from numerous Soviet experts, stating that they could expect the Soviets to negotiate in their typical difficult fashion and that the social and negotiating sessions would be harsh and uncomfortable. Only Ambassador Llewellyn E. Thompson told the delegation that they had a good chance at success.<sup>20</sup> The reception at Sheremetyevo Airport, however, began to dispel the expectations of a hostile atmosphere. After a warm welcome from Deputy Navy Commander Fleet Admiral Vladimir A. Kasatonov, the Americans were whisked into awaiting Soviet limousines and driven at high speed to the Rossiya Hotel, where rooms were reserved in the presidential bloc. This was the highest-ranking U.S. military delegation to visit Moscow since World War II, and during the trip in, the Soviet hosts continually reminded them that this was a navy-to-navy affair and that they were not to be subjected to the typical hindrances.<sup>21</sup>

At 1000 the next morning, Warner called on Kasatonov to lay out the general program of the talks. Kasatonov stressed keeping the discussions confidential, and he agreed with Warner not to include submarines on the proposed agenda. After Warner briefed the U.S. and Western press corps, the two sides met for the first session. Kasatonov made a businesslike, polemic-free statement, focusing on the desirability to implement practical measures to avoid incidents. He asserted that his ship captains and aircraft pilots had strict instructions to obey international law, while the United States and other countries were still guilty of transgressions. Addressing the subject of low overflights, Kasatonov claimed that such maneuvers in close quarters were infringements of the freedom of the high seas under the guise of seeking identification. He acknowledged that the rules of the road would act as a basis for the talks but added that norms of a general nature also had to be considered and that the Soviets would welcome additional proposals to avoid confrontation on the high seas. He concluded by citing the

memory of cooperation during World War II and other recent agreements, and he hoped, as a result of the talks, that the chance of armed conflict would be reduced. After Warner made his opening remarks, the delegations broke into two working groups-surface and air-and proceeded to negotiate.<sup>22</sup>

Later that evening, the delegation attended a Soviet-hosted dinner. During his toast to U.S. Ambassador Jacob Beam and Under Secretary Warner, Admiral Kasatonov enthusiastically announced that he had just been informed about the forthcoming visit of President Nixon and welcomed the visit "with pleasure" as a positive sign. Given the visit's significance, Kasatonov observed that the talks ought to be able to produce some understandings. Warner countered that the announcement made these toasts truly historic.<sup>23</sup>

Talks continued the next day with the same positive tone. The continued acceptance of issues put forth by the Americans had a discomfiting effect on some who sensed a trap. Kurth noted, however, that the Soviets' professionalism had a salutatory effect. He noted that Kasatonov was regarded as a very substantial man who had been a classmate of Admiral Gorshkov. Kasatonov was assisted by Admiral Vladimir N. Alekseyev, another widely regarded officer, and Igor Bubnov, a veteran diplomat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Kurth was especially impressed with the Soviet surface working group head Rear Admiral Motrokhov, who ". . . was obviously a very genuine, sincere, and outgoing man with the most admirable qualities which resulted in there being a special set of confidences placed in him by the American side."<sup>24</sup>

Using Gorshkov's personal airplane, Motrokhov escorted the U.S. delegation to Leningrad for a sightseeing trip over the weekend of the 16th and 17th. The itinerary included stops at most of the major tourist attractions, a harbor tour on the naval district commander's barge, and a luncheon at the naval base. Delegation member Captain Robert N. Congdon recalled being seated next to a young Soviet skipper and noted that the fellow was completely intimidated. "His hands shook and I had the most difficult time trying to converse with him." Later, a senior Soviet officer who had witnessed the incident pulled Congdon aside and apologized for the behavior of his comrade. The officer explained that the Soviet Navy had greatly expanded and had made a choice to fleet up junior officers to command the newer, sophisticated warships rather than retrain senior officers who had achieved rank when the navy was coastal-defense oriented. The officer added, however, that there was a concern that relative inexperience of one of these new officers could inadvertently lead to an incident with grave consequences for both countries. "This is why we agreed to talk and reach some sort of understanding."<sup>25</sup>

At the departing ceremony at Leningrad airport, Warner skillfully handled an awkward situation when the hosting admiral proposed one last toast and curled his arms around Warner's. As the vodka glasses crashed together, Warner's glass shattered and cut into his hand. He calmly licked the blood from his hand and exclaimed, "peace, we are brothers now."<sup>26</sup>

Despite the displays of hospitality and friendship, the negotiations were still difficult and the issues complex. The U.S. working group members often worked late into the night at the Embassy to prepare for the next day's talks. Progress was particularly slow with the air working group. Captain Edward R. Day had difficulty conveying the dangers of overflying aircraft carriers conducting flight operations to his counterpart, Major General Nicolai I. Vishensky. Finally, Day told the story of how, in spring 1968, he had the somber task of returning the body of a Soviet naval aviator whose Badger crashed after an overflight of the USS Essex (CV-9). Vishensky responded that the body had been that of his son. After that, the talks produced few areas of disagreement. Warner had rejected a Soviet proposal to consider air-to-air situations, because the U.S. delegation was not authorized to discuss that issue. The Soviets also proposed that minimum approach distances be established in ship-to-ship and aircraft-to-ship situations. The Americans rejected these proposals because of concerns from the intelligence and legal communities. Frustrated, the Soviets acceded to use the U.S.-proposed "general wording" formula in the interim." After a final meeting with Kasatonov on the morning of the 22nd, Warner emerged to hold a press conference and issued a press release, stating that the delegations had reached an understanding to submit for consideration by their respective governments.<sup>28</sup>

Upon his return to Washington, Warner gave a series of briefings to groups such as the National Security Council Under Secretaries Committee, and he also flew to Brussels to explain the understanding to the military committee

of the North Atlantic Committee. President Nixon received a full report as well. The presentations were well received, although Okun noted that some in the Navy hierarchy were concerned over the prospect of reaching an accord with the Soviet nemesis. To address these concerns, NSSM 140 directed another interdepartmental group to study issues that could be raised in a possible second round of talks. Lawrence Eagleburger was selected as its chair.<sup>29</sup>

Captain Robert Rawlins, the head of the U.S. surface working group in Moscow, argued that the unified and fleet commanders opposed the Soviet-proposed fixed-distance regimes. He recommended staying with the "general wording" formulation to ensure that U.S. capabilities to conduct "intelligence collection, identification, determination of hostile intent" were not degraded and that the commanders retained the operational flexibility to conduct assigned missions. Some members of the group opposed this position, because it limited U.S. flexibility in further talks.<sup>30</sup>

The group recommended that the United States make a quick close with the Soviets to finalize the October memorandum of understanding. On 7 March 1972, Ambassador Beam called on Admiral Gorshkov to present the U.S. proposal. Gorshkov agreed to review the proposed U.S. finalized text and to have Alekseyev respond in seven to ten days.<sup>31</sup>

On 20 March, Alekseyev responded that the Soviets were amiable to the proposed text but still desired a second round of talks. The Americans regretted that the Soviets were not willing to formalize the memorandum agreed upon at the first round of talks, but acceded to the Soviet request. Kurth recalled, "I talked with the people who were sitting on the negotiations and our impression was-yes, they had a few legitimate items, but we also suspected that many of them really enjoyed the prospect of coming to the United States."<sup>32</sup> The next step was to settle on a date. Eventually, the two sides agreed on 4 May.<sup>33</sup>

On 27 April, Ambassador Beam hosted a luncheon for the Soviet delegation in a relaxed friendly atmosphere. Admiral Kasatonov made a gracious toast, expressing hope that the second round would result in an overall agreement that would contribute to the propitious atmosphere for the upcoming Nixon visit. Several members of the Soviet delegation approached Beam about arrival arrangements in New York and sightseeing suggestions. Captain First Rank V. Serkov, the delegation's maritime law expert, mentioned a desire to travel and asked about San Francisco. Impressed with the Soviets' curiosity, Beam forwarded a message recommending a travel program that would expose the visitors to American life.<sup>34</sup>

#### The May Meeting

On the morning of 3 May, the Soviet delegation departed Moscow. Speaking to the U.S. Defense Attache prior to boarding the aircraft, Kasatonov expressed hope that the delegation's work could be finished and signed before traveling and sightseeing would interfere. After a moment's reflection, however, the Admiral rather resignedly remarked that this probably was not possible anymore than it had been for the Americans during the previous October.<sup>35</sup>

As the two sides reconvened in Washington to continue talks, the White House was preoccupied with the deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia. On 31 March, the North Vietnamese launched a massive offensive across the Demilitarized Zone and throughout April achieved rapid gains on the battlefield. As Soviet tanks rolled through Red Square to celebrate May Day, North Vietnamese troops entered Quang Tri City. On the day prior to the Soviet delegation's arrival, Kissinger was in Paris having his cease-fire proposal rebuffed by Le Duc Tho. With a negotiated cease-fire ruled out, President Nixon met with his advisors and began to consider mining North Vietnamese harbors. Kissinger was cool to the idea, as he felt such an action would directly challenge the Soviet Union and jeopardize the upcoming summit. Despite this concern, Nixon announced his decision in favor of mining on national television at 2100 on 8 May.<sup>36</sup>

How would the Soviets react? That evening, newly appointed Secretary of the Navy Warner had invited leading members of the Soviet delegation, along with Admirals Zumwalt and Hyman Rickover, to dinner at his Georgetown home. Secretary Laird forewarned Warner about the contents of the Nixon address and left it to him to handle the situation. Warner consulted with Okun, who advocated it would be prudent to allow the Soviets to watch the

address. Shortly after the guests arrived, the group gathered around the television set. As Nixon spoke, an interpreter provided translation. When the speech concluded, all eyes in the room focused on Kasatonov. After a long pause to gather his thoughts, the Soviet Admiral stated: "This is a very serious matter. Let us leave it to the politicians to settle this one." The only Russian who seemed upset was Bubnov who had a short, heated exchange with Zumwalt. As Bubnov spouted on about the situation's being "pregnant with grave consequences," Kasatonov turned to him and said softly, "please be quiet, we are about to have a very nice dinner."

The Nixon speech had no apparent impact on the Soviet delegation as the talks reconvened the next day. The White House received its first clue as to what the Soviet reaction would be. The summit would be held.<sup>37</sup> The question remained as to whether there would be an Incidents at Sea Agreement to sign in conjunction with that summit meeting. The Soviets continued to press for a fixed-distance regime. As dictated by the interdepartmental group response to NSSM 140, the U.S. delegation had no negotiating flexibility on this issue. Fortunately, the extensive social and travel arrangements made by the host navy diverted the delegates' attention away from their differences and allowed the Americans time to reexamine their position. Reciprocating for the treatment received in Moscow, Captain First Rank Serkov had his wish granted, as the Soviet delegation spent one weekend in New York and later was flown to San Francisco as part of a West Coast excursion that included a day's visit to Disneyland.

While the Soviets toured the Magic Kingdom, Laird, back in Washington, decided to stick with the previously stated U.S. position on fixed distances. He did accept a proposal to have the two sides meet again in six months to discuss the issue further. When the Russians returned from the West Coast, Kasatonov agreed to this provision and settled upon an agreement that would be signed at the Moscow summit by Secretary Warner and Admiral Gorshkov.

Did the extensive social and travel regimen contribute to the negotiations and ultimate success? Kurth felt that it ". . . really enhanced the confidence of the Soviet side about the American public and the attitude of the American people." He added that travel made as important a contribution as anything that had been done in the negotiations." Political realities also favored a negotiated accord, however. For Admiral Gorshkov, the accord and its provision for an annual review meant that within the Soviet Ministry of Defense, only the Soviet Navy had a direct communication channel with its U.S. counterpart. This enhanced his growing prestige.

The two sides met again in Moscow in November 1972. Although the United States still refused to yield to a fixed distance provision (and never would), groundwork was laid for a protocol signed the following May that extended the accord to cover merchant shipping.

Hailed as a successful "confidence-building measure," IncSea has been duplicated as numerous IncSea accords have been negotiated between U.S. allies and the former Soviet Union over the past dozen years. With the Cold War over, IncSea has been cited as a model for improving relations in other areas of the globe. IncSea negotiations have been an element of the Middle East Peace Process since 1993, and applications of the accord have been suggested for India and Pakistan and countries of the Western Pacific and Southeast Asia regions.

Whether IncSea can help stabilize relations in these diverse areas in the 21st century remains to be seen.

Whatever happens, the individuals involved in the negotiating and implementation process of the original accord can take pride in what has been a positive story in the ongoing relationship between the United States and now the Russian Federation.

#### **Footnote**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Because of space limitations we are unable to publish the author's 38 footnotes here. These footnotes are available upon request by contacting Proceedings editorial offices.

#### **Author Affiliation**

Mr. Winkler is writing an American University Ph.D. dissertation on U.S.-Soviet Cold War maritime relations. As a naval reservist, he served as action officer for the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Plans and Policy, to coordinate the annual U.S.-Russia Incidents at Sea Agreement meeting. His work has appeared in *Naval Review* (U.K.) and *Foreign Service Journal*, and he volunteers as a docent at the Navy Museum.

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