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LETTER DATED 27 FEBRUARY 1962 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS TO THE UNITED NATIONS
ADDRESSED TO THE ACTING SECRETARY-GENERAL

I have the honour to transmit herewith a message dated 21 February 1962 from Mr. N.S. Khrushchev, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, to Mr. John Kennedy, President of the United States of America, concerning the forthcoming meeting of the eighteen-Power Disarmament Committee.

Kindly arrange for the message from the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR to be circulated, together with this letter, as an official United Nations document.

(Signed) V. ZORIN
Permanent Representative of
the USSR to the United Nations

MESSAGE FROM MR. N.S. KHRUSHCHEV, CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL OF
MINISTERS OF THE USSR, TO MR. JOHN F. KENNEDY, PRESIDENT OF
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Mr. President,

I have received your reply to the Soviet Government's proposal that the work of the eighteen-Power Disarmament Committee should be started off by the Heads of Government (or Chiefs of State) of the countries represented in the Committee. I must frankly say that I am distressed by your negative attitude to this proposal.

I will not hide the fact that I have been considering the idea of beginning the Disarmament Committee's work at the highest level for some time. As I told you, your message of 7 February reached me at the very time when I was working on an appeal concerning this matter to those taking part in the forthcoming talks, and that gave me further encouragement.

After your reply to my appeal, however, the situation looks quite different.

It appears from your message that you consider that if it is possible for the Heads of Government to take part in the disarmament talks at all, they should not do so until definite progress has been achieved in those talks. But it may well be asked, who is most likely to achieve such progress, to create a favourable atmosphere for the talks? Those who are invested with the fullest authority and play the leading part in shaping policy or those who are not entrusted with this responsibility and whose freedom of action is therefore limited by previous instructions? It seems to me that there is only one answer to that question. It is clear that Heads of Government have a far greater chance of achieving such progress than anyone else.

The question can be put like this: which is better, which will produce better results - if the Heads of Government exercise control from a distance or if they roll up their sleeves and themselves get down to the most difficult business, setting the negotiations on the right track and working to achieve the progress which you speak of in your message?

As far as I am concerned, my fundamental rule is to be wherever the most important work is to be done, wherever it is most important to achieve success. As I see it, that is an obligation placed on me by my position as Head of the Government. If we were to remain far away from Geneva, we should, willy-nilly,

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have to treat the problems arising in the course of the disarmament talks just as one of the many important matters that statesmen in our position have to deal with every day.

I will say frankly that I am surprised at the inconsistency of some of the arguments you put forward in your message. You agree that the Heads of Government should accept a personal responsibility for the success of the disarmament negotiations opening in Geneva on 14 March. But you go straight on to propose that we should wait until the foreign ministers have achieved concrete results. Suppose that, as has happened in the past, the disarmament talks do not make any progress - are the Heads of Government then to wash their hands of the matter? If so, what will have become of their personal responsibility for the negotiations, the importance of which you stress in your message? No, this simply does not hang together.

In my view, there is no substance, either, in your argument that before the Heads of Government can consider the situation taking shape at the disarmament talks, a great deal of preliminary work will have to be done to elucidate the positions of the different sides. I will go further and say that your statement that there is further exploratory work to be done disappointed me greatly. That is exactly the trouble - up to now we have got no further with disarmament than explaining our positions. How much longer can we go on elucidating, studying and clarifying each other's positions, when we have already devoted some fifteen years of talks, meetings and contacts at various levels, of endless arguments and disputes, to doing just that?

Surely we have already piled up enough documents, outlining a complete programme for the phasing of disarmament, setting out in the minutest detail disarmament procedures and the corresponding control measures - documents, in short, which indicate with absolute clarity the positions of the various Governments? We can, of course, add yet more reams of paper to this mountain of documents, but that will not reduce the existing armies by a single division or a single soldier or the existing armaments by a single missile or a single cartridge. The delay is due to a lack of clarity, not with regard to the matters on which we disagree but, on the contrary, with regard to the matters on which our views are closer together. For a long time now it has not been a question of exploring positions, but of how to overcome the differences which have appeared and pave the way for

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an agreement. To say that anyone still has to spend time on exploring positions is simply a refusal to make any attempt to get the disarmament negotiations going on a practical basis.

And if previous negotiations have in fact left some questions unanswered, it is evident that it was certainly not due to any lack of effort. As I have said before, disarmament encroaches upon the most closely guarded preserve of every State, the realm of its security, which in the present world situation everyone prefers to keep as far removed as possible from alien scrutiny. For that reason, a certain degree of trust and frankness, without which a solution to the problems of disarmament cannot even be approached, can perhaps be reached only among those who bear the highest responsibility to their peoples for the security of their countries. And who bears this responsibility if not the Heads of Government (or State)? Moreover, if the testing time should come, many of them will have to take command of the armed forces of their countries. There is also no need of proof that personal contacts between Heads of Government can more readily lead to a better understanding of their respective aspirations, greater confidence and as a consequence of this - who knows - perhaps new ideas too.

If experience of past disarmament negotiations serves any useful purpose, it is primarily that of demonstrating how little practical progress towards disarmament may be expected without the most direct and effective participation in the negotiations by statesmen at the highest level. Precisely because the positions of those taking part in the negotiations have been too extensively explored, it follows that only statesmen at this level can break the deadlock over disarmament, assuming of course that this is desired by all the parties concerned.

Therefore neither ministers, no matter how highly they may be respected by the Governments and peoples of their countries, nor other representatives, no matter what their rank, can achieve anything unless the Heads of Government place the negotiations on a solid foundation by displaying a willingness and desire to reach agreement on the problems of disarmament.

As you do not at present wish to head the United States delegation in the negotiations in the Committee of Eighteen, and as you give so specious an argument as lack of the necessary preparation to justify your position, we can only conclude that you have not yet made up your mind to seek agreement on questions of

disarmament. We cannot help wondering whether your reluctance to go to Geneva, Mr. President, is not due to the fact that you have already privately condemned the Committee of Eighteen to failure, making up your mind in advance that the Committee will not succeed in dealing with the problems which it was set up to solve. It is clear that the Western Powers are not yet ready for a disarmament agreement, and that is why you think it more expedient for the moment to remain a little aloof from the negotiations on this question. This is how all thinking people will be bound to interpret your unwillingness to agree to the Disarmament Committee meeting at the highest level.

If the work of the Committee of Eighteen is left to the foreign ministers, this will be a clear indication - and this will, of course, be understood by the ministers - that the Heads of Government, the chiefs of State do not wish to assume responsibility for the possible failure of the negotiations and prefer to lay any blame at the door of the ministers.

One can easily imagine how things will finally turn out. The foreign ministers, who are busy men, will - as often happens - turn over the negotiations to persons of lower rank, and they in their turn to officials at an even lower level. And so it will come about that, in the final analysis, the negotiations are to all intents and purposes conducted by civil servants. You would then find it difficult to explain what has become of the personal responsibility of Heads of Government to which you now refer.

In your message of 14 February, Mr. President, you mentioned the fact that there are substantial differences between our countries on the question of disarmament control. It is true, there are such differences, but what do they stem from? You are trying to persuade the Soviet Union to agree to the institution of control not only over the armed forces and armaments being reduced or destroyed under an agreement, but also over that part of their armed forces and armaments which States will temporarily retain. The United States and its allies evidently want the Soviet Union to submit all its armed forces to control, to disclose its whole system of defence before disarmament really begins.

I must say frankly that if you adopt this approach to the question of control, you will achieve nothing, because we shall not accept it.

The Soviet Union is concerned to establish the strictest international control over the implementation of a disarmament agreement. If, for example, we agree to general and complete disarmament in stages, in our opinion, the execution of each measure of disarmament laid down for each stage must be carefully verified. We are no less anxious than anyone else to be sure that the armaments and armed forces scheduled for destruction at a given stage are in fact destroyed or dealt with as previously agreed upon and specified in the agreement. This is genuine, effective control over disarmament. What you are proposing is not control over disarmament, but something else.

Let us suppose that we agree to reduce the armed forces of our countries by several divisions. We are ready to do this. But you are demanding the institution of control not only over the disbanding of these divisions, but over all the armed forces and armaments at the disposal of States. One might well say, along the lines of the proverb: give him an inch and he'll want an ell.

In the era of nuclear and ballistic weapons into which we have now entered, large armies have far less significance than in the First and Second World Wars. Today, war would immediately take on an all-embracing and world-wide character, and its outcome would depend not on the operations of troops along a line dividing the belligerents, but on the use of nuclear and ballistic weapons with the help of which a decisive blow can be delivered before great armies can be mobilized and led into battle.

In modern conditions, therefore, reduction of the armed forces of States by a few divisions would in no way affect the position. But the control over the military potential of States which you want in exchange for what is essentially an insignificant reduction in armed forces is a different matter. The institution of such control would give a major strategic advantage to a State contemplating aggression.

The kind of control proposed by the Western Powers, namely, a control that would in effect precede disarmament, we have every reason to regard as espionage. Such control would allow an aggressive State to station its intelligence agents in the territory of peace-loving States and gather information on their defence system. And it could then decide whether to agree to further disarmament or to steer events in the direction of war.

This is not what we want. The Soviet Union wants an honest agreement guaranteeing that there would be no threat to the security of any State either during the process of disarmament or after its completion. Therefore we say: let us work out an agreement on general and complete disarmament under the strictest international control and let us carry out the provisions of this agreement in stages in such a way that the control is commensurate with the particular disarmament measure being carried out. After completing one stage of disarmament under control, let us then proceed to the next stage, likewise under control. This is a sound, realistic approach to the question of control, and no one has yet succeeded in proposing a better one.

In the first stages of disarmament, of course, there will be some armaments and armed forces which will for the time being remain outside the scope of international control. But that will be nothing new; for as matters stand at present, we do not know exactly the quantity of armaments in the possession of the other side. Under phased disarmament, armaments and armed forces will be reduced by agreed instalments, so that the existing alignment of forces and balance will not be destroyed.

As for the quantity of armaments and armed forces for which exact information will be lacking after the completion of each stage, this will diminish constantly until it is reduced to nil.

How then does this raise any threat to the security of States? There is no such threat; and with this approach there cannot be.

The same can by no means be said of the proposals put forward by the Western Powers. By insisting that control must precede disarmament, the Western Powers are only strengthening the suspicion that they are pursuing any aim in the world but that of disarmament.

It is hard not to feel that some sort of a game is being played with disarmament. The peoples of the entire world are demanding disarmament; they want to throw off the burden of military expenditure, to clear the horizon of the storm-clouds of war, but the Western Powers are unwilling to disarm.

It is for that very reason that a variety of plans are making their appearance which are deliberately designed to be rejected by the other side. This is very much the kind of chicanery which is resorted to when it becomes necessary to bury a live issue.

How else can one describe disarmament plans which provide for a 1 per cent reduction in forces and the extension of control to the remaining 99 per cent of the armed forces? How else can one interpret the refusal of the Western Powers to relax even in the smallest degree the intensity of their military preparations; for example, to abolish military bases on the territories of foreign States and to withdraw their troops from Europe to their own territory? The Soviet Union is prepared to repatriate immediately its troops now stationed abroad, if the Western Powers will do the same.

Where, in such plans, is there any real spirit of partnership, any understanding of the aspirations of the peoples, any desire to eliminate the danger of a war fought with rockets and nuclear weapons which would bring incredible disasters and suffering to all mankind? There is not the slightest trace of such an approach.

With the Governments of the Western Powers taking this attitude on the problem of disarmament and pushing the main issue - the destruction of State military machines - into the background under cover of a show of concern about questions of control, there are genuine grounds for fear that the new Committee may meet with the sad fate of its predecessors. If there is no desire to negotiate on a realistic basis, then, of course, the disarmament negotiations will produce no useful results, whether the Committee begins its proceedings with the participation of the Heads of Governments, at the foreign minister level or at any other level.

It is not my custom to dissemble or to conceal the truth; let me therefore speak bluntly. Your reply, like Prime Minister Macmillan's message, made me feel that the journalists who perceived ulterior motives in your proposal that the Committee of Eighteen should begin its work at the foreign ministers level might perhaps be in the right. They associated this proposal directly with the declaration made by the Governments of the United States of America and the United Kingdom concerning their intention to resume testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere.

These journalists argue along the following lines. They understand that the Soviet Union will not let this aggressive action go unanswered. The reckless urge of the United States of America and the United Kingdom to build up their nuclear arsenals and to increase the destructive force of their nuclear weapons

will inevitably compel the Soviet Union to compete in the stockpiling and improvement of such weapons. It is natural that the Soviet Union - which moreover has carried out a much smaller number of nuclear test explosions - will not wish to fall behind, and will make every effort to keep its atomic armament up to the mark. As a result, the whole process will be given unprecedented impetus and the nuclear arms race will be raised to greater and greater heights. The peoples, of course, will put the blame for this on the Governments of the United States and the United Kingdom.

Similarly, they say that the intention of the Governments of the United States and the United Kingdom in proposing that the disarmament negotiations should be conducted at the ministerial level was to neutralize, by some means, the hostile reaction of world opinion to the planned resumption of nuclear tests, to sweeten the bitter pill by making a gesture in the direction of disarmament. This view was further strengthened when the United States and the United Kingdom rejected the Soviet proposal that the work of the Disarmament Committee should be started at the highest level, with the participation of Heads of Governments - a concrete and businesslike proposal which offered greater prospects for the success of the negotiations. For all my desire to avoid unpleasant words, the conclusion is forced on me that there is some truth in these Press comments.

What, then, are the prospects? We are living in times of rapid scientific and technological development, times when new scientific and technological achievements are recorded not just every day but literally every hour. The numbers of nuclear rockets are swelling from day to day; already we, and you too, have thousands. But the greater the number of people involved in the handling of death-dealing nuclear rocket weapons, the greater the possibility of an accident. In the United States of America, indeed, there have already been cases in which "duty" bombers carrying nuclear bombs have suffered accidents and crashed, with most unpleasant consequences.

But the possibility of similar accidents occurring not just to bombers but to rockets equipped with thermonuclear warheads is by no means excluded. Apart from all the other causes, it needs only a disturbance in the mind of a particular individual operating a rocket-launching installation to bring about the irremediable: the explosion of a nuclear device on the territory of another State. It will be difficult then to prove that the cause was an accident, and

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nothing more. Indeed, will there be time for such explanations to be given and heard? The accidental launching of a single rocket equipped with a thermonuclear warhead may start a catastrophic world war.

Hunters have an excellent unwritten rule: even when you know a gun is not loaded, do not point it at anyone, be it in jest. As they rightly say, once in ten years even an unloaded gun fires.

Not very long ago it was reported in the Press that Ernest Hemingway, the great American writer, had lost his life accidentally while cleaning his hunting rifle. However great the loss, in that case only one man died through carelessness in handling a weapon. But an accident in the handling of nuclear rocket weapons would cause the death of millions and millions of people, and many would be doomed to slow death as a result of radioactive contamination.

All this is further warning that the leaders of States, who bear responsibility for the fate of mankind, must realize the true nature of the situation to which the rocket and nuclear armaments race has already brought us and to which it is leading us. General and complete disarmament, that is, the total elimination of all weapons, and especially nuclear weapons, has become in our time a vitally important problem, taking precedence of all others. Because it desires the solution of this problem at the earliest possible date, the Soviet Government held that the work of the Committee of Eighteen should be initiated at the highest level, and it still maintains that view.

If agreement on questions of disarmament is to be achieved, unnecessary niceties must be set aside and the interests of the cause, the interests of strengthening peace, must be placed first and foremost. That is why I venture to hope that you have not yet said your last word as regards your participation in the discussions of the Committee of Eighteen.

The Soviet Government considers that the proposals it has put forward for general and complete disarmament under strict international control offer a basis for reaching agreement without prejudice to either side or advantage to the other. We are ready, of course, to consider other proposals, provided that they are in fact such as to ensure a solution of the problem of general and complete disarmament.

The Soviet Union and the other socialist countries wish to reach an agreement on disarmament questions. If the Governments of the Western Powers desire such an agreement, then there is good reason to hope that the negotiations, with the participation of Heads of Governments, will produce tangible results and that agreement will become possible. That would do great honour to those who, at the outset of the negotiations, had laid the foundations for future agreement and found a way to surmount the existing difficulties. And how great a reward it would then be for Heads of Government and Heads of State to sign a treaty on general and complete disarmament, to take part in an historic event which would be engraved for ages in the memory of all mankind.

With respect,

N. KHRUSHCHEV

Moscow, 21 February 1962
