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Document 1: Letter from U.S. President Jimmy Carter to Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev

Instructions: On December 29, 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter sent a letter to the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Read the letter below and then answer the questions that follow. As you read, use different colors to mark 1) words or phrases that you do not understand; 2) the 3-5 sentences that you think are most important; and 3) any sentence that refers to events described in your reading. Answer the questions that follow with your group. Be prepared to share your answers with your classmates. Use additional paper as needed to record your answers.

Message to Brezhnev Regarding Afghanistan

Dear President Brezhnev:

I want to insure that you have fully weighed the ramifications of the Soviet actions in Afghanistan, which we regard as a clear threat to the peace. You should understand that these actions could mark a fundamental and long-lasting turning point in our relations. Taken without any previous discussion with us, they constitute in our view a clear violation of the Basic Principles on Relations, which you signed in 1972. My Government can in no way accept the Soviet Government's explanation, conveyed to Ambassador Watson on December 27, that Soviet military forces were sent into Afghanistan at the request of the leadership of that country. The facts of the matter clearly show that these same Soviet forces were employed to overthrow that established government of Afghanistan and to impose a new government, which has brutally executed the former President and, reportedly, his family.

Large-scale movements of military units into a sovereign country are always a legitimate matter of concern to the international community. When such military forces are those of a superpower, and are then used to depose an existing government and impose another, there are obvious adverse implications both for the region and for the world at large. We note with the utmost seriousness that this is the first time since the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia that the Soviet Union has taken direct military action against another country. In the present instance, the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan—a previously non-aligned country—obviously represents an unsettling, dangerous and new stage in your use of military force, which raises deep apprehension about the general trend of Soviet policy.

We are both pledged to each other not to exacerbate conflict-fraught situations and to consult when threats to the peace arise. If these mutual obligations are to have any meaning, then they must obviously include a refusal by the superpowers to engage in armed combat except as a very last resort and then only in legitimate self-defense. Because our interests are global, we must recognize that actions taken in one area have a spill-over effect in other seemingly unrelated areas, as well as in that area itself.

Neither superpower can arrogate to itself the right to displace or overturn a legally constituted government in another country by force of arms. Such a precedent is a dangerous one; it flouts all the accepted norms of international conduct. Unless you draw back from your present course of action, this will inevitably jeopardize the course of US-Soviet relations throughout the world. I urge you to take prompt constructive action to withdraw your forces and cease interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Many years of promoting more stable and productive relations between our two countries could well be undermined if this situation is not resolved promptly. With proper action by your government, it is still not too late to avoid lasting damage to US-Soviet relations.

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Questions

1. Briefly summarize the purpose of the letter from Carter to Brezhnev.
2. What does President Carter state the Soviet Union has done in Afghanistan?
3. Why is Carter concerned about the invasion and the assassination of Afghanistan's president?
4. List the three most important sentences from the letter. Explain your reasoning.

Document 2: Letter from Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev to U.S. President Jimmy Carter

Instructions: On December 29, 1979, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev responded to President Carter's letter. Read the excerpts below and then answer the questions that follow. As you read, use different colors to mark 1) words or phrases that you do not understand; 2) the 3-5 sentences that you think are most important; and 3) any sentence that refers to events described in your reading. Answer the questions that follow with your group. Be prepared to share your answers with your classmates. Use additional paper as needed to record your answers.

Dear Mr. President,

In reply to your message of 29 December I consider it necessary to say the following.

It is impossible to agree in any way with your assessment of what is going on right now in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. We have already given explanations about what is actually going on there based on the facts and also the reasons which caused us to favorably respond to the request of the government of Afghanistan to introduce a limited number of Soviet troops.... [Illegible]...to the American side confidentially through the American ambassador in Moscow and to you personally.

The attempt made in your letter to cast doubt on the very fact of the request of the government of Afghanistan to send our troops to this country seems strange. I am forced to note that someone's comprehension or incomprehension of this fact or agreement or disagreement with it by no means determines the actual state of affairs. And it is as follows.

For almost two years the government of Afghanistan repeatedly turned to us with this request. Incidentally, one such request was sent to us on 26 December of this year. We, the Soviet Union, and the Afghan side, which sent us such requests know about this equally.

In connection with the content and the tone of your letter I consider it necessary to again explain that the request of the government of Afghanistan and the granting of this request by the Soviet Union are exclusively the business of the USSR and Afghanistan, who control their relations themselves by their own agreement and, of course, cannot permit any outside interference in these relations. They, like any UN member, have the right not only of individual but also of the collective self defense stipulated in Article 51 of the UN Charter which the USSR and US themselves formulated. And this has been approved by all UN members.

Of course, there is no basis for your statement that our actions in Afghanistan allegedly represent a threat to peace.

In light of all this, the immoderate tone of some of the wording of your message is striking. And to what purpose? Wouldn't it be better to assess the situation more quietly, keeping in mind the higher interests of peace and not putting the relations between our two countries in last priority?

As regards your "advice," we have already informed you and I again repeat here, that as soon as the reasons which prompted Afghanistan to make the request of the Soviet Union no longer exist we intend to completely withdraw Soviet military contingents from the territory of Afghanistan.

And here is our advice to you: the American side could make its own contribution to a halt in the armed invasion of the territory of Afghanistan from without.

I don't think that the work to create more stable and productive relations between the USSR and US could become useless if, of course, the American side does not want this. We don't want this. I think that this would also not be to the advantage of the United States of America itself. It is our conviction that it is a mutual matter how relations between the USSR and US develop. We think that they ought not to be subject to fluctuations under the influence of any outside factors or events.

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In spite of the differences on a number of questions of world and European policy about which we both clearly know, the Soviet Union is an advocate of pursuing matters in the spirit of those agreements and documents which have been adopted by our countries in the interests of peace, equal cooperation, and international security.

L. BREZHNEV

29 December 1979

Questions

1. Briefly summarize the purpose of Brezhnev's letter to Carter.
2. How does Brezhnev justify Soviet actions in Afghanistan?
3. Does Brezhnev believe that events in Afghanistan should have an influence on U.S.-Soviet relations?
4. List the three most important sentences from this letter. Explain your reasoning.