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From the Private Secretary

23 November 1987

Dear Sir,

US/SOVIET SUMMIT: POSSIBLE VISIT BY MR. GORBACHEV

The ubiquitous Mr. Kossov got in touch with me at short notice this morning with yet another request relating to Mr. Gorbachev's possible visit on 7 December, which incidentally he now regards as absolutely firm.

Kossov said that he had very recently delivered to the Foreign Office a note saying that a Soviet aircraft carrying Mr. Gorbachev's advance party for Washington would over-fly the United Kingdom on 26 November landing at Shannon in the Republic of Ireland. He had this morning received a flash cable from Moscow saying that the aircraft would instead like to land at Brize Norton on Wednesday 25 November. The aircraft would be an IL-62M, the same one which Mr. Gorbachev would use. It would have on board the advance party including a number of protocol and security people and some journalists. It would arrive at 1105 and depart 1½ hours later. The main purpose of requesting the landing was to enable the pilots to familiarise themselves with the runway, refuelling arrangements and so on. If it were possible for members of the advance party on board to see very briefly the building where the meeting with Mr. Gorbachev would take place, that would be a bonus but it was not absolutely essential. Mr. Kossov handed over the enclosed note about the flight together with a form required by the Ministry of Defence which the Soviet Embassy had already filled in. I said that this was of course very short notice. I would consult the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence to see whether it was possible. But I knew the very great importance which the Prime Minister attached to the visit and I was confident that we would try to help if we could. However, I had to say that the flight would inevitably become known to a wider circle of people who would rapidly draw the conclusion that it was a prelude to a visit by Mr. Gorbachev. I hoped therefore that we could have a formal decision and possibly even an announcement of the visit by Wednesday. At the least I must ask the Soviet side to accept that we could not exclude the possibility of a leak. Mr. Kossov said that this was understood. The Soviet preference would be to avoid any premature publicity if possible.

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Mr. Kossov then added that if at all possible the Ambassador would wish some members of the Embassy to go to Brize Norton on Wednesday to be present for the aircraft arrival and departure and if possible to see the facilities. Those concerned would be himself, Mr. Smagin whom he described as the Embassy's chief security officer, and the Aeroflot representative Mr. Mirzoyan. They would like to travel to Brize Norton by car if that were feasible. I said that I would look into this too.

I realise the difficulties of setting all this up at short notice, not least for people at Brize Norton who are so far completely unaware I assume of the possibility that Mr. Gorbachev is likely to land among them. However, I think the Prime Minister would want us to co-operate as far as we possibly can, given in particular the very considerable lengths to which the Russians went to make acceptable arrangements for her own visit to the Soviet Union. Could I ask you and the Ministry of Defence to co-ordinate very urgently on this. The MoD will of course have to discuss with the Station Commander and no doubt others at Brize Norton. I would hope they could urge the need for preserving the need for maximum confidentiality. I think it also a good idea if the Foreign Office were to appoint someone to liaise with the Soviet Embassy on all this and preferably to accompany the members of the Soviet Embassy when they go to Brize Norton on Wednesday (assuming that can be arranged). I should be grateful if you could let me know by 6 pm today if in principle we can agree the Soviet request. I will then put Mr. Kossov in touch direct with the appropriate people in the Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence to discuss further details.

I am copying this letter and enclosures to John Howe (Ministry of Defence).

yes dear,
Chris Powell

(C. D. POWELL)

Lyn Parker, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.