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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SOVIET MILITARY-POLITICAL RELATIONS
SIX MONTHS AFTER KHRUSHCHEV

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

Office of Research and Reports

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SOVIET MILITARY-POLITICAL RELATIONS SIX MONTHS AFTER KHRUSHCHEV*

Summary

Six months after the fall of Khrushchev there are few outward signs of the policy disputes that vexed Soviet military-political relations during the last years of the old regime. Military leaders have displayed uncharacteristic circumspection in their public comments since the coup, avoiding the sharp formulations on sensitive issues of defense policy that had signaled their opposition to official policy in the past. Political leaders, on their side, have steered away from direct comment on military policy, limiting themselves to occasional verbal assurances of their solicitude for the nation's defenses and of their high esteem for its military leaders. Military policy has moved into the background of public commentary under the new regime, and something like a political cease-fire on the defense front has prevailed.

Yet, despite the relative absence of internal controversy over military policy, there is little evidence that the issues left over from the Khrushchev regime have been resolved or that the tensions surrounding these issues have diminished. In terms of the substance of policy, as opposed to the formalities of public dialogue, the relationship between the Soviet military and political leaderships appears to remain much as it was before the overthrow of Khrushchev. On the three principal issues that had been brought to focus by Khrushchev's policies -- the size and role of the ground forces, the role of the military in national policy-making, and the share of the military in national resources -- signs of tension persist. What has been missing in the political equation over the past 6 months has been a clear-cut formulation by the regime of its views and expectations regarding defense policy. With this missing, statements by military leaders have tended to lack focus, but they have not failed to give evidence that military leaders remain committed to the basic policy positions they have defended in the past.

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* The estimates and conclusions in this memorandum represent the best judgment of this Office as of 15 May 1965.

1. The Ground Forces Issue

The issue of a cut in the strength of the ground forces offers the clearest illustration of these features of the current military-political relationship. This has been a touchstone issue in the long controversy over strategy and force structure that has divided the military leadership itself into missile enthusiasts on the one side and traditionalists on the other. But since the ground forces have been the favorite target of political efforts to economize on military spending and since many of the top military leaders belong to the more traditionalist side of military thinking, the ground forces question has also assumed the form of a military-political issue. The origins of the issue go back to Khrushchev's announcement in December 1963 that the regime was contemplating a further reduction of armed forces personnel. While the fate of the proposal has never been clarified, it is clear that military opposition to the measure was evident up to the eve of Khrushchev's overthrow and that the present regime has refrained from reaffirming or disavowing the policy.

It appears that the new Soviet leaders have sought to avoid commitments on the issue until the settlement of broader lines of policy has been completed and the leadership situation has been stabilized. This objective appears evident in the one quasi-official pronouncement on the issue that has appeared since Khrushchev's overthrow -- a statement of the principal tenets of Soviet military doctrine included in an article by Colonel Sidelnikov and Major General Bochkarev published in Red Star on 21 January 1965. The significant aspect of the statement, from the standpoint of ground forces policy, is that it omitted a key word from the standard formula which had provided the doctrinal justification for the retention of large ground forces. The key word was "only" in the formula: "Victory over an aggressor can be achieved only by the combined efforts of all types of armed forces." The purpose of the deletion, it seems apparent, was to remove a doctrinal fetter from the leadership's freedom of action on this question.

If the regime anticipated that this evasion of commitment would satisfy military opinion, its calculation misfired. Far from dampening concern over the issue, the statement appears to have stimulated renewed agitation. On 17 February, Marshal Sokolovskiy gave a press interview in which he stated -- according to the original TASS report as well as the Westerners who were present -- that the size of the Soviet armed forces had been reduced to 2,423,000 men, the level that Khrushchev had set as the goal of his major troop reduction policy in 1960. What Sokolovskiy meant to achieve by this revelation is obscure. It is clear, however, that his statement was unauthorized since it was quickly muffled by censorship authorities. It is also clear that it ruffled military opinion, for it was followed a few days later by an article in Red Star, authored by Marshal Bagramyan, which cast aspersions on Sokolovskiy's qualities as a wartime leader.

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This skirmish was followed by a much more significant event centering around an article by Colonel-General Shtemenko, a deputy chief of the General Staff, published in the Sunday supplement of Izvestiya on 9 February. Although the content of the article was conspicuously innocuous, its title -- "The Queen of the Battlefield Has Yielded Her Crown" -- was provocative. It was apparently regarded by military opinion as a hint of some policy in the making and a direct challenge to prevailing professional views on the role and importance of the ground forces. The rejoinder came from Pravda some months later. Reporting on a speech by Marshal of Tank Troops Rotmistrov in its issue of 15 April, Pravda observed that the Marshal had "convincingly criticized views which have slipped into the press that allegedly 'the queen of the battlefield -- the land forces -- is relinquishing her crown to the rocket weapons.'" The clash between Pravda and Izvestiya, the main organs of the Party and the government, respectively, recalls similar phenomena in the post-Stalin period and suggests the possibility that differences of opinion on this issue within the present collective leadership are being revealed. It also reveals that the issue of ground forces policy remains open and that controversy around this issue continues along much the same lines that were evident in the past.

2. The Military Role in Decision-Making

The evidence of military efforts to reassert a claim to a more explicit role in the formulation of military policy has also been plain. It was expressed most clearly by Marshal Zakharov in an article published in Red Star on 4 February. The main theme of his article was the assertion that a balanced approach and scientifically grounded conclusions were required to solve the complex problems of military policy. While the tone was obviously a gesture to the political proprieties of the moment, in Zakharov's hands this theme became a perceptibly slanted argument carrying the implication that the "expertise" required in the elaboration of military policy belonged by right to military professionals. In view of the long history of military-political tensions over this issue -- highlighted most dramatically by criticisms of the first edition of Sokolovskiy's Military Strategy for giving unwarranted support to military pretensions in this matter -- the renewal of pressure along these lines must be ranked as a significant index of military temper and assertiveness.

3. The Resource Allocation Problem

On the question of the share of the military in the allocation of national resources, only a hint of a military lobbying effort has yet emerged. This appeared most noticeably in an article by the prominent military theorist V. Larionov which appeared in Red Star on 18 March 1965. Reflecting a line of argument that had been developed within the

restricted pages of Military Thought over the preceding year, Larionov implicitly cautioned against false economies that might deprive the country of reserve means and forces required to successfully prosecute a war and stated that Soviet military strategy must envisage the needs both of a fast-moving war and a protracted war requiring the combined efforts of all types of armed forces. In particular, he stressed the notion that the outcome of a future war would be decided by the forces and means available at the outset.

The importance of the Larionov article for the issue under consideration lies in the signal it gave that military claims on national resources were supported by weighty theoretical arguments. The ancestry of these arguments can be traced back to the beginning of 1964, when the military leadership was preparing to resist the renewed pressures for economies forecast by Khrushchev's proposals of December 1963 for reductions in the military budget and in troop strength. A series of articles appeared, mainly in the theoretical organ Military Thought, laying new stress on the need for preparing and deploying all necessary strategic reserves in the period prior to the outbreak of war.

The essential elements of this argument were set out as early as February 1964 in a seemingly routine article by the deputy chief editor of Military Thought, Major General S. Kozlov. Discussing the nature of a future nuclear war, he observed that the role that was to be played by the economic capabilities of the participants would be played predominantly in the period preceding the outbreak of hostilities. In other words, the outcome of the initial nuclear exchange would be decided by the men and weapons available at the beginning.

The argument was carried forward by Marshal Biryuzov in an article published in Military Thought in August 1964. Warning of the danger of surprise attack by the West, Biryuzov hammered on the theme that a country unprepared for war runs the risk of losing a war that might be thrust upon it. With respect to the importance of reserves, Biryuzov said, "Considering the danger of significant destruction by the opponent of economic targets in the beginning of the war and the resultant difficulties of mobilizing industry, it is necessary to create in advance specified reserves of military equipment, military supplies, production capacity, and strategic materials." The same point was reiterated in a group of discussion articles which appeared in the following issue of Military Thought and in an article by G. Miftiyev in Communist of the Armed Forces, No. 18, September 1964.

That these articles were parts of a coherent argument rather than random expressions of a commonplace military bias is attested by the coincident appearance of a number of counterarguments -- that is, the reactions of military theorists representing viewpoints other than

those expressed in these articles give evidence that these articles were recognized as representing a tendentious line. One example of this countertrend was an article by Lt. Col. S. Bartenev which appeared in Red Star on 7 July 1964. He noted that large military reserves would be targets of attack at the outset of a war and hence unlikely to affect the outcome. Another was an article by I. Punanov which was placed as the lead article in the same issue of Communist of the Armed Forces which carried the Miftiyev article cited above. Punanov argued that the interests of military preparedness were best served not by hasty efforts to accumulate military means but by the balanced development of the economy as a whole.

To summarize the evidence cited above, during the course of 1964 a line of argument was developed in the military press aimed at justifying high levels of production for military equipment and supplies. The coincidence of this development with Khrushchev's last efforts to reduce military manpower and to force reallocations of resources to the chemical industry suggests that the military was seeking to buttress its claims on national resources. Since the change of regime, the argument has appeared again over the signature of Larionov, a military spokesman whose credentials as a modernist -- and, hence, as one qualified to represent the wing of military opinion most in line with the current direction of Soviet policy -- are impeccable. The lesson for the political leaders would seem to be that military opinion is unlikely to be any less intractible in the negotiations over resource allocations that lie ahead than it has proved to be under similar circumstances in the past.

The next step in Soviet military-political relations would appear to be up to the political leaders. The leadership of Brezhnev and Kosygin has given every indication of an intention to press ahead with ambitious economic development programs, particularly in agriculture, which would appear to imply some tightening of the constraints operating on military production programs. The control figures for the next 5-year plan are now being worked out with some difficulty, as is apparent from Kosygin's speech to Gosplan on 19 March. If the effort succeeds in reconciling the demands of the military leadership with the requirement for a "redistribution of budgetary means" in support of agriculture, as called for by Brezhnev at the March plenum, the military opposition of recent years may be expected to lose its potency as an active factor in Soviet policy formulation. If, however, as seems more likely, the effort fails to satisfy the demands of influential elements within the military leadership, renewed conflict over military policy may be anticipated.

The latter possibility would be the more likely if splits should develop within the current political leadership. In such a situation, factions within the leadership would be tempted to cast about for ways of rallying support among the powerful institutions and special-

interest groups ranged below the top leadership level. The natural conservatism of the Soviet military establishment probably would tend to make it a passive factor in any leadership struggle. But the mere fact that it exists and that it is capable of asserting and defending its interests would constitute a powerful influence on the content of whatever "alternatives" to existing policies any opposition faction might deem it expedient to champion.