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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

DDI #4198-82
20 May 1982

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM : [redacted]
Acting National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE

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SUBJECT : Some Implications of the Soviet Political Succession for US Policy

1. As a follow-on to the recent SOVA work* on the Soviet political succession, I would like to offer you some additional thoughts on the subject. Specifically, I want to suggest some of the possible lines along which Kremlin politics could move in the near term, to underline the great uncertainties inherent in the succession process, and to draw out some of the implications for US policy.

2. By now it is clear that Brezhnev's health has deteriorated to the point that would-be successors are actively maneuvering to position themselves for the succession. The focus of attention is naturally on Brezhnev's main post: General Secretary of the Party, but we should not overlook that he holds two other important jobs--Chairman of the Defense Council and Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. When the Presidium Chairmanship position was strengthened by the 1977 Constitution, there was speculation that Brezhnev was preparing the way for becoming Head of State while relinquishing the more onerous daily duties of the General Secretary. As it turned out, of course, Brezhnev did become Presidium Chairman but kept his other positions. The reason for this was clear and remains applicable today: it is the General Secretary who runs the

*The Soviet Political Succession: Institutions, Peoples, and Policies, April 1982.

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country and it is the leadership position to which the most ambitious leaders will aspire. His holding these three positions, however, gives potential conspirators some maneuvering room and, should Brezhnev die while still holding the three offices, means that there would be a number of tradeoffs available. Complicating the current situation further is the necessity of filling at least one important Secretary post (Suslov's) and possibly two (Suslov's and the ailing Kirilenko's). The filling of these slots will of necessity produce other openings and create temptations for the top competitors to demonstrate and enhance their power by advancing the careers of their proteges. In addition, the post of Chairman of Council of Ministers, now filled by the 76-year old Brezhnev crony Tikhonov, is likely to be seen as another attractive plum or way-station for one of the competitors in a post-Brezhnev era.

3. In light of these possibilities and vacancies, I believe that the Soviet leadership is most likely to move along one of the five following possible lines, presented in order of decreasing attractiveness to Chernenko - Brezhnev's current favorite among potential heirs-apparent:

--With Brezhnev's blessing, Cherenko becomes General Secretary and Brezhnev remains Presidium Chairman.

--No real change, giving Chernenko time to consolidate his position.

--A reshuffling of Secretariat positions and ministries leaving Brezhnev holding his three posts and the post-succession situation as muddled as ever.

--A leader other than Chernenko becomes General Secretary while Brezhnev stays on as Presidium Chairman (this means that Brezhnev has either willingly abandoned or been forced to abandon his efforts to help Cherenko).

--Brezhnev is ousted from all his posts and replaced by either a duumvirate or a triumvirate. This, of course, means the execution of a successful plot against Brezhnev.

4. Within each of these possibilities, there are variations and developments which will lend themselves to different interpretations. For instance, were Andropov to take over Suslov's post in the Secretariat, this would generally be seen as a positive development for him. On the other hand, one could argue that Andropov would be weakened by being separated from his

KGB institutional base--particularly if he were replaced by a man who did not owe his allegiance to him. I bring out this point to illustrate that our knowledge of the Politburo interplay and, therefore, our ability to predict the succession outcome is very limited. Even more important, we do not really know how the political infighting will affect policy. We can make some judgments about the policy preferences of the contenders by looking at their previous speeches, but we cannot know which policy issues they will use in a struggle for power or what policy they will actually follow if they manage to reach the top and consolidate their position.

5. A review of the West's record in looking at previous Soviet successions should reenforce our diffidence. In the 1920s, we probably would have picked Trotsky as the eventual winner but would have preferred Stalin with his "more moderate" program of building socialism in one country. In 1953, we labeled Khrushchev "a colorless bureaucrat" who had no chance to succeed. Little did we expect that he would not only succeed but launch a dramatic de-Stalinization effort - particularly since in 1953 he appeared to be the "conservative" struggling against the more "reformist" Malenkov. In the 1960s, very few expected another equally "colorless bureaucrat"--Brezhnev--to oust his patron and then preside over an extremely consistent and successful long-range effort to build up Soviet military power while securing a modus vivendi with the West. In short, the historical record suggests that the West has been consistently wrong, both in picking the eventual winners and in describing the policy line that they would follow. I don't think our chances for accurate predictions are much better today.

6. The main reasons for this are that we still know precious little about the men who run the Kremlin and not much more about their policy-making process; that it is hard to predict how the policy debate will flow either in the succession struggle or the consolidation phase; and that this debate and its outcome will be influenced not only by Soviet domestic developments but also by international events--not the least of these being US policy. None of this is meant as criticism of Western analysis. After all, who would have predicted in 1974 that President Carter would be elected in 1976 and, in 1977, who thought that he would eventually impose a grain embargo against the Soviet Union?

7. What are the implications of all this for US policy?

--First, we should concentrate on policy rather than personalities and we will not be sure of Soviet policy

until Brezhnev's successor has consolidated his power. I realize that the intelligence community will repeatedly be asked who is on top and we will have to give our best judgment, but we should keep in mind and constantly stress the primacy of policy over personalities as the central focus of US interests.

--Second, we can expect the various contenders to try to advance their political ambitions by seizing on some policy issues. We may prefer some of the public stands taken during the succession struggle over others but we cannot be sure that the same policy will be followed if that particular contender wins. Consequently, we should not try to adjust our policies to the Soviet internal conflict but rather try to get them to adjust their internal conflict to our policies. In other words, we should not favor any particular individual but should present the Soviets with alternatives that will make contenders vie for who can best lead the USSR along a path least detrimental to US interests.

--Third, the temptation to arrive at premature judgments will be strong and encouraged both by the Soviets as well as some Westerners. On the Soviet side, the usual publicists (probably led by Arbatov) will be seeking our help for the so-called "moderate elements" who will be under predictable siege by the "hard-liners." In the West, those who are enamored with the negotiating process, regardless of substance or likely consequences, will also be advocating that we exert our leadership and become actively engaged in a dialogue with the "moderates." Both of these siren calls should be resisted.

--Fourth, our refusal to become involved in the Kremlin power struggle need not and should not mean the rejection of dialogue. Rather, we should strive to have the emergent leader enter the dialogue on our terms. What this requires, above all, is consistency in US policy--which in turn means the establishment of positions which can enjoy long-term public support in the West (a goal no less worthwhile for being so difficult to achieve) and which offer the USSR both positive and negative incentives.

--Fifth, assuming we can develop positions which meet the criteria outlined above, our prospects for Soviet responsiveness will probably be better during a

succession struggle--particularly in its later stages. As the SOVA paper amply illustrates, there is no institutionalized method of conferring legitimacy on Soviet rulers. In the absence of such methods, the external trappings of power become an important element in conveying to both Soviet and international publics the established pecking order (thus the importance of such things as Kremlin lineups at conferences). For an emergent Soviet leader (or leadership group) the most spectacular legitimizing devices are meetings with foreign leaders where they can be seen as representing the Soviet state. A meeting with the President of the US, which establishes him as an equal with the leader of the USSR's major rival and other superpower, is the highest status symbol. It is therefore possible that, in exchange for a summit, the new Soviet leader(ship) will be willing to make an extra effort to reach some agreement with the US. Khrushchev's reconciliation with Tito--essentially on the latter's term but conveying the impression of restored international communist unity--and his agreement to the Austrian State Treaty to set the stage for the Geneva Summit are encouraging precedents. The attractiveness of a summit will be greater to Brezhnev's successors than to him. Consequently, unless different considerations dictate otherwise, we would profit most by holding back the possibility of a summit as an additional inducement for flexibility on the part of the post-Brezhnev leader(ship).

--Sixth, we cannot expect the Soviet leaders to simply accede to US demands for the sake of a summit, but we should at least try to obtain some extra concessions in exchange for that legitimizing occasion. Consequently, I think it behooves the USG to select those issues which would lend themselves to a fairly early resolution between the US and the new Soviet leadership along lines favorable to us. Once the post-Brezhnev succession struggle starts in earnest, we could then advance some proposals and let the Soviet leadership decide on its new international path against the background of those proposals.

8. In sum, then, we are facing a period of major uncertainties in Soviet politics. Those uncertainties will be magnified by size of the coming political turnover since changes in the Politburo will set in train changes in the entire overaged Soviet central and regional leadership structures. Any attempt by the US to become actively involved in the process by favoring

this or that contender will compound the uncertainties and will most likely lead to unintended consequences--if not backfire totally. The US can strive to influence the policy outcome by fashioning reasonable proposals and then sticking to them for as long as it takes the Soviet leadership to sort out its new domestic power relationships and to address the US proposals in a responsible way. Judicious selection of negotiating issues which appear tractable, careful preparation, and patience are the integral elements of a US approach which may allow us to influence the Soviet succession in a way favorable to us.

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