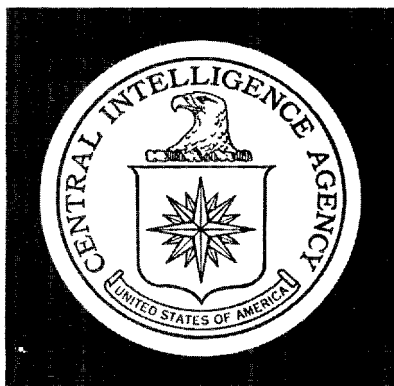


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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

The Soviet Buildup Against China:

Dimensions and Implications

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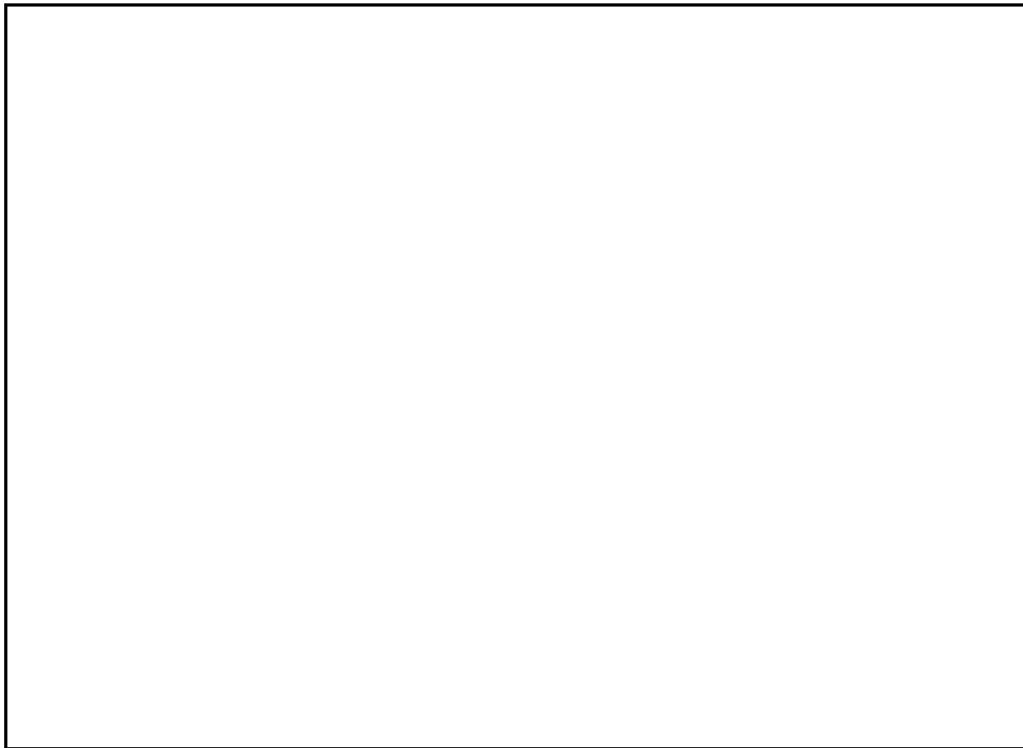
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6 May 1969



No. 4-69

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

6 May 1969

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 4-69

SUBJECT: The Soviet Buildup Against China: Dimensions and
Implications*

SUMMARY

The continuing buildup of Soviet conventional and nuclear capabilities opposite China has already far exceeded the level appropriate to meet "border class" requirements. By the end of the year, Soviet theater forces along the China border will be stronger than those deployed in Eastern Europe. Further, there are some indications that strategic nuclear delivery systems will be part of the array of Soviet military power oriented toward China.

While the size and nature of the buildup seems disproportionate to any threat the Chinese now pose, it is evident that the Soviets take possible future contingencies very seriously. The Soviet forces will provide a strong deterrent to Chinese military adventures. Should deterrence fail or

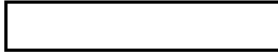
* This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and coordinated with the Office of Strategic Research.

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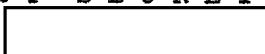


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should Soviet security interests so dictate, those forces will be capable of punitive action, limited objective conventional war, tactical nuclear war, or even a general nuclear assault on China in conjunction with strategic strikes.

Whether or not these forces are ever used, their creation and maintenance will inevitably affect Soviet forces opposite NATO; at a minimum, planned improvements to those forces will be delayed or stopped, and it is possible that their capabilities may be degraded. Moreover, the Soviet strategic concern reflected in the buildup in the East may already be having far-reaching effects on the other areas of Soviet policy, particularly in Europe.

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DISCUSSION

The Buildup To Date

1. Theater Forces.^{*} In 1963, the Soviets were maintaining a force of about 13 divisions opposite China from Turkestan to the Far East. Of these, probably fewer than half were combat ready.^{**} There are now 27 divisions either combat ready or being built up opposite China. We now expect this total to reach as many as 30, and it is quite likely that most, if not all of them will be combat-ready divisions. In 1963, there were two army or corps level headquarters; there are now at least five and possibly six such headquarters. There was one potential front^{***} level headquarters; there are now probably two.

* For greater detail see SR/IR 68-7, "Soviet Military Forces on the Sino-Soviet Border," [redacted] September 1968.

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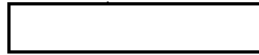
** See NIE 11-14-63, "Capabilities of Soviet General Purpose Forces, 1963-1969" (S) 8 January 1964.

*** Similar to an army group.


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2. The ground forces opposite China exceed in number Soviet forces in Eastern Europe^{*} and they may exceed those forces in quality as well, particularly as regards supporting units. They are receiving some of the latest model tanks and personnel carriers (T-62 and BTR60). 

 the 5th Army in the Southern Maritime area alone has greater artillery support than does the entire Soviet Group of Forces in East Germany (GSFG) -- two artillery divisions and one or two brigades^{**} -- and that other formations opposite China also have more artillery strength than most Soviet forces elsewhere.

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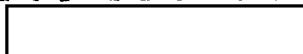
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3. Most remarkable is the level and quality of tactical nuclear support. Front-level missile support includes 45-54 Scaleboard (SS-12) mobile launchers, 8-12 Shaddock (SSC-1) launchers, and a larger than normal Scud (SS-1) complement as well. Soviet front-level tactical missile support in Eastern

* This comparison is a measure of Soviet theater force efforts, not of relative importance of the Eastern and Western areas. Soviet forces in Eastern Europe are of course much more concentrated and are bolstered by allies.

** Three of the five Soviet armies in East Germany have one brigade of artillery; two armies have none. There is one artillery division assigned to GSFG.

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Europe includes only some 9, possibly 18, Scud launchers. There appears to be a higher proportion of Frog launchers opposite China than is found in Soviet ground forces west of the Urals.

4. Since 1966 the Soviets have more than doubled the total number of tactical aircraft opposite China. A new tactical air army was created in the Transbaykal MD -- Mongolia area -- which now has 300 aircraft, making it the second largest Soviet tactical air army. Another 230 combat tactical aircraft are in the Far East MD. These numbers continue to grow.* Over 30 airfields have been either renovated or constructed along the Chinese border. Eight of these are in Mongolia and are as yet unoccupied. Most of the newly activated tactical air regiments are equipped with older model aircraft (MIG-17 and IL-28). These aircraft are better suited for ground attack and reconnaissance missions than for air defense. The air forces opposite China have a much higher percentage of the new Hip MI-8 helicopters than do those opposite NATO.

* There are now a total of 530 tactical combat aircraft in the Transbaykal and Far East MD's.

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5. Strategic Forces. Soviet Long Range Aviation (LRA)

units would almost certainly be involved if the Soviets are planning for full-scale nuclear contingencies in the area. Such involvement is suggested by a recent highly unusual exercise in which a Badger medium bomber regiment from the western USSR (Southwest Bomber Command) deployed to the Far East and conducted exercises. Medium bombers of this command have been consistently oriented toward Europe, although they have on occasion deployed to western Arctic airfields to carry out naval support missions. LRA units in the Far East have been conducting reconnaissance against China regularly since 1965. Last year the LRA headquarters at Blagoveschensk on the border, was moved to Ukraina, deeper inside the USSR, perhaps for physical security reasons. Since then there has been a split in the command and control setup for LRA in the Far East with a new, high echelon headquarters established at Irkutsk. Although the foregoing is not conclusive evidence of Soviet planning for LRA bomber missions in China, such planning would be a logical development in view of other Soviet military preparations. Soviet medium bombers could probably penetrate Chinese air defenses rather easily to deliver either conventional or nuclear bombs.

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6. There is nothing arrayed against China comparable to the massive MR/IRBM force targeted against Europe. However, the Soviets could use some of their ICBMs against China if necessary.

7. Evidence of Soviet strategic attack preparations against China is thus quite tenuous at present, but it should not be too surprising if more such indications come to light. Theater force preparations for military contingencies in the east, including that for tactical nuclear warfare, leave no doubt as to the seriousness of Soviet concern. Given that concern and the nature of the strategic military problems in a war with China, it would be remarkable if the Soviets did not reorient some of their strategic attack capabilities.

8. Soviet reconnaissance of China also provides a strong indication of Soviet strategic concern. Since 1965 there has been a sharp increase in reconnaissance activity against China; This is most evident in the satellite reconnaissance effort.

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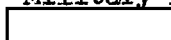
The Nature of the Buildup and Its Probable Goals

9. The bulk of the buildup described above began in 1966, and the decision to proceed with it was probably taken in 1965.* The Soviets must have then reached the decision that large scale warfare was at least as likely against China as against NATO.

10. This being the case, the size and nature of the buildup was probably determined largely by geographical considerations, and these all but dictate that the Soviet military posture must be suitable for offensive rather than merely defensive operations. From Turkestan eastward, the militarily important

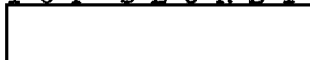
* For a fuller discussion of political indicators of such a decision see ONE Special Memorandum 7-68, "The Soviet Military Buildup Along the Chinese Border," 25 March 1968

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terrain on the Soviet side consists of a thin strip of territory adjacent to the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The vast Siberian territory north of this strip might as well be an ocean as far as organization of defense-in-depth is concerned. But unlike an ocean, it provides no hope of an alternate to the Trans-Siberian Railroad for a lifeline to the USSR's European power base. The military experience of the Soviets in the area -- the Russo-Japanese border clashes of the 1930's and the World War II invasion of Manchuria -- also would incline them toward an offensive strategy.

11. Another aspect of geography affecting the buildup is the sparseness of Soviet population in the area. There are only about 13 million people east of Novosibirsk (this figure has remained constant for at least a decade), and many of them are military or government employees. There are no significant prospects for drawing additional military manpower from the area. Thus the Soviets must draw from the Western USSR to man their forces in the East, and they must keep them at or near combat-ready strength. Facilities for large combat-ready

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forces were not available and had to be constructed. Distance from industrial areas demand that higher levels of supply be on hand. These factors make the cost of maintaining forces opposite China considerably higher.

12. The spectre of two-front war has probably exerted considerable influence on the size and posture of Soviet forces oriented toward China. Barring a well-established detente with the West, the Soviets would probably consider a war in the east an exploitable opportunity for NATO. This would argue strongly for an in-being capability to get any Sino-Soviet conflict over with very quickly. For the most serious contingencies this would involve the Soviet use of nuclear weapons, perhaps on a massive scale, despite the obvious political disadvantages.

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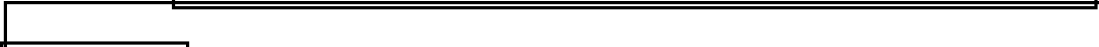
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Probable Soviet Force Goals

13. From the foregoing we can venture a prediction of the size and posture of Soviet forces arrayed against China when the buildup is complete. Evidence from the buildup to date indicates that the Soviets have decided to place strong, offensively-posture, nuclear missile-equipped theater forces astride all the good avenues of approach into North China and opposite Sinkiang Province.



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The Soviets are now concentrating on completing the buildup of army and front level supporting units and increasing tactical air strength. We have detected no additional divisions being generated in the area although we cannot rule out the rumored transfer of existing divisions from other areas to the Chinese border. The buildup could be completed in early 1970 and be postured about as follows:

-- The Far East Military District with headquarters at Khabarovsk will probably become a front in-being with some 15 divisions. This front will have much heavier conventional and tactical nuclear fire power, and much heavier service

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support than the potential fronts opposite NATO. Armies of this front will be stationed in three main groupings on the northern and eastern borders of Manchuria, astride the WW II invasion routes.

-- Transbaykal MD-Mongolia probably will become a small front in-being* with two Soviet armies, including the eight Soviet divisions already there. Such a front would control Soviet and Mongolian forces astride the WW II invasion routes into North China. It would probably be more heavily supported and more combat ready than potential fronts in the Western USSR, but because the Transbaykal MD is buffered by Mongolian territory, it will probably not achieve the peacetime size and readiness of the Far Eastern front; in wartime it might be reinforced from the Siberian, Volga, the North Caucasus MDs.

-- The Soviets will probably continue to station at least a corps in Turkestan opposite Sinkiang adequate to overwhelm

* The commander of this military district, General Belik, was recently promoted to four-star rank, indicating the growing military importance of this area. Belik had been deputy commander of GSFG and is a leading Soviet tank warfare expert.

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the light Chinese defense of that province. This force will be heavily supported with tactical nuclear missiles. This force could be expanded fairly quickly from within the Turkestan Military District.

14. The Soviets will probably direct more of their strategic attack capability against Communist China. Tactical nuclear capabilities in the east will probably continue to exceed considerably those of Soviet forces opposing NATO.

15. Soviet forces in European USSR may no longer serve exclusively as ready reinforcements against NATO but may double as reinforcements against China. The smaller, less ready forces in the central military districts (Siberian, Volga, North Caucasus and Ural) may be upgraded to provide reinforcements.

The View from China

16. The Chinese military posture vis-a-vis the Soviets certainly does not provide a rationale for the Soviet military buildup. Chinese security elements along the border have been belligerent and grossly obnoxious; minor skirmishes and at least one sizable armed clash (the Ussuri incident) have occurred. The

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Chinese are aware of the Soviet buildup (although probably not in detail); they have protested it vigorously. But in general they have done remarkably little with their regular military forces in response to the Soviet buildup.

17. Substantial Chinese ground forces have for many years been stationed in Manchuria and adjacent areas of North China. They are well away from the border, however, and have made no apparent movements to improve their dispositions to attack or defend in a conflict with the Soviets. There has been some increase of Chinese strength in Sinkiang, but that area remains thinly garrisoned. Ethnic minorities along the borders have been removed and replaced with quasi-military Chinese "Production- Construction Corps." There has been no apparent priority given the Sino-Soviet border in the fairly extensive efforts of the past several years to improve Chinese air defense.

Soviet Military Strategy Toward China

18. Deterrence. Viewed from the West, the Soviets appear to be overreacting to the Chinese threat. It is hard to see how the Soviets could visualize a deliberate large-scale Chinese invasion of the USSR. Even if the Kremlin takes seriously the

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aggressive Chinese talk about regaining disputed territories, the obvious Soviet superior military strength prior to the build-up appeared more than adequate to deter direct military aggression. But the Soviets often appear ultra-conservative in the matter of deterrence. Viewed from Moscow, the threat from the Chinese must appear at least as great as the threat from NATO. China must look massive, hostile, irrational -- and worst of all, close.

19. The future Chinese threat may appear even more ominous. The Chinese will acquire a significant medium range nuclear attack capability long before they pose a nuclear threat to the US. As the Chinese nuclear capability grows, the price the Soviets would pay to exploit their own nuclear advantage will grow, and the deterrent effect of that advantage to Chinese non-nuclear aggression will progressively decline. The presentation in the Kremlin of the Chinese threat by the Soviet military leadership would certainly reflect the conservatism of the professional military viewpoint, the institutional interests of the military establishment, and the historic Russian dread of Oriental expansion.

20. The evidence to date indicates that a very pessimistic view of the threat from China does indeed prevail in the Kremlin.

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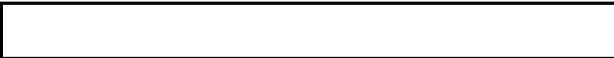
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The military buildup against China may be fully consistent with the Soviet view of requirements for deterrence of Chinese military initiatives ranging from infiltration of irregulars to all-out war. Theater force dispositions are distinctly offensive and suggest that the Soviet deterrent is based on capabilities to inflict severe punitive action inside China, with or without the use of nuclear weapons. 

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Soviet military exercises in the Far East have played China as the opponent, and have involved Soviet use of nuclear weapons. Dispositions in Mongolia not only block potential Chinese incursions, but could be, lead elements for a heavily armored offensive ground force around Lake Baykal which might attack either toward Peking or toward the Chinese missile and nuclear facilities.

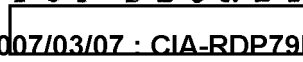
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Wars of Limited Objectives

21. While deterrence is probably the primary determining factor in the size and posture of Soviet forces deployed against

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China, other possible uses for these forces have almost certainly been taken into account. Given an opportunity or an excuse, the Soviets would probably excise the Chinese nuclear threat. There can be little doubt that Chinese nuclear facilities would be attacked immediately should large scale conflict with the Chinese break out. The Soviets may also wish to have forces ready to exploit any opportunity to create buffer states in Manchuria or Sinkiang.

Total War

22. The Soviets probably consider total war with China a remote contingency, but apparently do not rule it out. Any large-scale Soviet strategic attack against China would probably be a massive attack on centers of population and industry, since more discrete targeting of Chinese military installations would not necessarily disable the Chinese Army.

Implications for Soviet Policy Elsewhere

23. The buildup against China is a very expensive proposition. To the initial costs of creating, equipping and housing the newly activated or enlarged units is added the incremental costs of

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long-distance land transport and the increased costs of maintaining large forces in combat ready status in sub-arctic conditions. The Soviet effort can be compared with an attempt on the part of the US to maintain such large forces in Alaska, with its similar labor scarcity and environmental problems. The costs to the Soviets must certainly increase the strain of military expenditures on their economy, and thus put the buildup against China in competition with other Soviet military efforts, especially the maintenance and improvement of theater forces opposing NATO. Soviet problems in resource allocation along with considerations of military strategy undoubtedly bolster arguments for detente with the West.

24. The buildup against China has almost certainly had an adverse effect on the Soviet theater forces opposing NATO. While there has been no reduction in the total number of divisions earmarked for use against the Central Region of NATO, there has been a diversion of men and materiel which could have been used to increase the readiness and accelerate the modernization of those divisions.* The mobile tactical missile units

* As noted in NIE 11-14-68, at least two of the Soviet divisions used in the Czechoslovakian crisis had few or no armored personnel carriers. Such vehicles are appearing in large numbers along the Chinese border.

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now deployed along the border may have been originally intended for the forces opposing NATO. We know that cadres were taken from ground forces west of the Urals to build up units in the east. One of the tactical air regiments was transferred from the Baltic MD. Pilots for the new air regiments in the east were drawn from existing regiments elsewhere in the USSR.

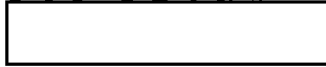
25. It now appears that the Soviet Union, having tried with indifferent success to get political support against China from its Eastern European allies, is attempting to involve these countries in the military confrontation with China. Warsaw Pact ministers of defense and their delegations to the USSR (Czech and Polish) have visited, of all places, the Transbaykal Military District, perhaps to be impressed by the seriousness of the Soviet military situation vis-a-vis China. The Foreign Minister of Bulgaria, Bashev, has been quoted as saying that the Warsaw Pact would respond to a Chinese attack on the USSR -- a quote which has alarmed the rest of Eastern Europe. The same is true of rumors concerning the stationing of East European forces opposite China. These cannot now be regarded as more than reflections of anxiety

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among the East Europeans, but that anxiety may not be
entirely baseless.

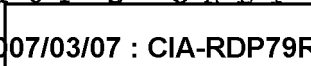
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