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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

15 February 1980

MEMORANDUM

French Views on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan [redacted]

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Summary

*Conflicting signals in French policy statements on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reflect France's effort to reconcile its own evolving analysis of the Soviet threat, and the appropriate response to it, with domestic public opinion and the country's commitment to the Atlantic alliance. The US and France have now publicly minimized their disagreement over the abortive foreign ministers' meeting that was to be held this month in Bonn, but they still analyze the Afghan crisis differently and offer differing prescriptions for dealing with it. At the same time, there has been considerable backing and filling in French policy statements, as well as a tailoring of communiques--such as the recent French-Indian communique--to the needs of a special audience.*

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Implications of the Afghanistan Invasion

Some officials are now willing to admit that the initial French response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was "flabby," but the French have never underestimated the gravity of the Soviet challenge. They see serious implications in Africa, if--as some believe--all restraints on Soviet behavior in that area are now lifted. The French view Chad and the Central African Republic as particularly vulnerable and some believe that the Soviets would welcome a civil war in Rhodesia.

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[redacted]

*This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Western Europe Division, Office of Political Analysis. The paper has been coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for Western Europe and the Office of Economic Research. Research was completed on 15 February 1980. Questions and comments may be addressed to the Chief, Western Europe Division, Office of Political Analysis [redacted].*

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The impact of such officials on decisionmaking in France probably varies with the issue--French African policy, for example, has always been closely held by Giscard and a few key advisers. More generally, the French political system gives the president a relatively free hand to make policy decisions without consulting either parliament or his own Foreign Ministry. [Redacted]

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Yet comments from several high-level French government officials appear to reveal a consensus that the invasion of Afghanistan is rooted in Soviet "paranoia" and that the appropriate response is a graduated one or, as Foreign Minister Francois-Poncet put it, one of "mounting pressure." [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Francois-Poncet believes the US violated an understanding this month, when news of what was to have been an unpublicized informal dinner meeting of foreign ministers appeared in the media, thus making it impossible for France to attend. Some French officials have linked other issues with their refusal to attend the proposed meeting, noting pointedly that the US postponement of sanctions against Iran was made without prior consultation with the West European capitals and followed weeks of US pressure on European allies to join in sanctions. [Redacted]

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The USSR

Francois-Poncet's political director will visit Moscow later this month, but his brief will be limited to pressing the Soviets on their plans for withdrawal. According to the French Foreign Minister, military contacts with the USSR have been broken off, and not much was expected from the economic commission that has just completed its mission in Moscow. When asked by a US journalist what the French reaction would be if the Soviets did nothing in the next two or three months, Francois-Poncet said the bilateral dialogue would be reduced to "one subject" and trade would ultimately be affected. French Foreign Ministry officials believe that priority should be given to stepping up civilian and military aid to vulnerable countries like Turkey, Pakistan, and the sheikhdoms on the Persian Gulf, and that the West should aid the Afghan rebels. [Redacted]

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At the same time, the French believe that the Soviet Union needs to be offered a face-saving way to withdraw its troops. A presidential adviser has told the US Embassy that the French are currently looking

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into the idea of a neutralization of Afghanistan along the lines of the Austrian state treaty. They think that the scheme should be confined to Afghanistan in order to avoid giving the Soviets inspection rights over other countries in the area. [redacted]

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The US

French policy since de Gaulle has emphasized a whole network of "special relationships" that link France with the developed and developing world. Gaullist theology requires France to claim a pivotal role in East-West detente and to avoid following the lead of the US. There are practical considerations as well. France has long lacked confidence in the consistency of American resolve and fears that the American failure to consult allies adequately could involve consequences for those allies that would be more serious for them than for the US. There is a genuine concern that a future US policy reversal could leave Paris out on a limb. French officials are not convinced that the US will ultimately boycott the Olympics, and they wonder if the strong US reaction to Afghanistan is not at least partially motivated by domestic political considerations. [redacted]

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In addition, President Giscard has made de Gaulle's concept of "anti-super bloc" policies his own. In his recent trip to India, Giscard was careful to underline his support for genuine nonalignment (as opposed to Castro's) and his wish to help insulate the nonaligned from superpower rivalries. This reflects the French view that in South Asia the principal threat posed by the Soviet Union is not in Afghanistan but in India. If India falls under Soviet influence, the French argue, there will be no saving Pakistan. [redacted]

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The Economic Factor

French hopes of increasing economic ties with the Soviet Union are an important but not determining factor in French reluctance to move against Moscow. French imports from and exports to the Soviet Union each total about \$1.5 billion annually, 2 percent of total French trade. Although this percentage is small, some specific trade dependencies cause concern. France buys 5 percent of its coal and crude oil imports from the USSR and 20 percent of its petroleum product imports. Perhaps most significant are growing French purchases of natural gas, which now account for 14 percent of France's natural gas imports. [redacted]

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On the export side, around 10 percent of French foreign sales of heating and cooling equipment and metalworking machinery go to the USSR. The Soviets also buy a relatively large share (more than 5 percent) of French steel and chemical exports. Paris has been hoping to become a leading supplier to the Soviet Union of high technology items such as

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computer, telecommunications, and oil exploration equipment--in many cases precisely the types of goods the US is trying to limit or proscribe. We have received mixed information on French intentions to continue sales of these products and to push to replace US suppliers. At a minimum, we believe the French will maintain a low profile and will almost certainly not sign any splashy new contracts. Paris, however, will probably try discreetly to maintain negotiations on new sales and, over the slightly longer term, clearly hopes to be in a better competitive position vis-a-vis US suppliers--or other major countries that follow the US lead. [redacted]

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The Domestic Factor

1981 is a presidential election year in France, and a president as meticulous as Giscard is in plotting every detail of his campaign is unlikely to overlook the boon that foreign policy initiatives can be to an incumbent president. Yet Giscard is not in such a tough race (although he would like to win with a healthy margin) and electoral considerations are not so paramount that domestic considerations can be viewed as overriding or even critical--at least at the moment. [redacted]

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Giscard's rightist rival for the presidency--Gaullist leader Jacques Chirac--gave a prudent and moderate speech on 12 February, his first major speech in eight months. In it he indicated a wide range of agreement with Giscard on foreign policy--a tribute to Giscard's success in covering his Gaullist flank. Chirac knows that if he is to have even the shadow of a chance at the presidency, he must be careful in confronting Giscard on sensitive foreign policy issues which are viewed as a presidential preserve in France. The irascible official Gaullist newsletter, which had criticized Giscard initially for not speaking out forcefully enough on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, has recently been grumbling about Giscard's neglect of French independence and alleged collusion with West Germany, as evidenced in the recent French-German communique. Chirac's speech, however, indicates that moderation will probably be the Gaullist leadership's tactics for the time being. [redacted]

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The French Communists, unwavering in their effort to portray themselves as the sole representative on the left of French national interest and hoping to capitalize on latent anti-German sentiment in France, have predictably joined in the anti-German chorus. The Socialists, for their part, have given qualified support to the French-German communique while continuing to criticize Giscard for not speaking out sooner and more forcefully against Soviet moves in Afghanistan. [redacted]

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Thus, as the US Embassy in Paris observes, foreign policy issues are looming larger than usual in the French domestic political debate, with the question of French independence and relations with West Germany once again dividing political parties across traditional majority-opposition lines. The fiercely nationalist Gaullists and Communists are attacking the Giscardians and Socialists for not sufficiently respecting the independence of French foreign policy. Whether this is a transient phenomenon depends in large part on events outside French control. [redacted]

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