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Soviet Military Forces Opposite Iran  
and In Afghanistan

Summary

Soviet military forces would have to undertake extensive preparations before they could conduct a general invasion of Iran or Pakistan. We believe that Soviet motives for invading either country are presently small. Even if Moscow's incentives increased, concern over possible US reactions and apprehensions about becoming bogged down in far larger guerrilla wars than the Afghan one would be likely to deter Moscow from attacking Iran or Pakistan.

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The USSR's long-term objective in Iran is the establishment of a pro-Soviet government. With little likelihood of achieving this any time soon, Soviet efforts will be aimed at keeping the US from regaining its pre-Khomeini position in Iran.

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For the time being, Moscow appears unwilling to court Tehran until the Khomeini regime takes genuine steps to reverse its anti-Soviet propaganda campaign, end its support for the Afghan resistance, enter negotiations with Iraq, and ease repression of the Tudeh (Communist) Party.

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We judge it unlikely that the Soviets would undertake military action against Iran in the foreseeable future.

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If the USSR were to decide to invade, however, it has sufficient ground and tactical air forces stationed in its Southern Theater of Military Operations (TMO) north of Iran to conduct a general offensive into Iran intended to reach the Persian Gulf and occupy the country. Soviet forces stationed in

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the Transcaucasus, North Caucasus and Turkestan Military Districts and in Afghanistan are part of the Southern TMO. The USSR also has some 117,000 troops on the eastern flank of Iran in Afghanistan. [redacted]

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However, the forces in the Southern TMO would have to make extensive preparations before undertaking a general invasion of Iran, which would far surpass any Soviet military action since World War II. The forces in Afghanistan, while already at full combat strength, are too heavily engaged there, too strained logistically, and too lacking in roads and other communications to be able to make a significant contribution to any action against Iran. [redacted]

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The Soviet army also lacks both the strength and the logistical base in Afghanistan to undertake major military actions against Pakistan. For some years to come, the continued Afghan resistance will probably keep the Soviets so tied down that they will not pose a threat from Afghanistan against Pakistan, although Moscow may intensify the present border incidents and even launch limited strikes into Pakistan in an effort to deter it from supporting the mujahideen. [redacted]

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We believe the Soviet leadership misjudged the extent of resistance that would be encountered in Afghanistan. Their experience of getting bogged down there in a larger, longer war than they had expected is likely to make them extremely chary of sending troops into either Iran or Pakistan and thus multiplying their problems with guerrilla resistance--even if they could claim some legitimacy by responding to appeals for support by new regimes. [redacted]

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The Soviets are also likely to be deterred from invasion of either country by uncertainty over possible US counteractions. Although Washington does not have any legal commitment to the Khomeini regime, it has in the past indicated an intention to respond to any threat to Gulf oil supplies. Moscow probably would be particularly wary of invading countries that have seacoasts across which aid could reach resistance movements more readily than it now reaches the Afghan mujahideen. [redacted]

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### The Soviet Threat to Iran

Circumstances which could lead the Soviets to consider an invasion of Iran include:

- The introduction of US military forces into Iran or the perception by Moscow that the US was about to do so.
- The rise to power in Iran of a pro-Soviet faction which

[redacted]

"requested" Soviet assistance to solidify or sustain its rule.

- The eruption of civil war in Iran following the death or fall from power of Ayatollah Khomeini which plunged the country into prolonged political chaos.
- The initiation of a Warsaw Pact-NATO or Soviet-Chinese war and the subsequent expansion of military operations to include Iranian territory. [redacted]

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Even under these conditions, however, the Soviets would still be reluctant to commit their forces, and they would do so only if convinced that non-military measures had proven fruitless or were assessed as unlikely to succeed. [redacted]

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### Soviet Ground and Air Forces

The Soviets currently have 24 motorized rifle divisions, one tank division, one airborne division, and other ground combat and combat support units in the Southern TMO.

- Most divisions have their full complement of equipment, although it consists almost exclusively of older models such as the T-54/55 tank and towed artillery.
- Soviet ground forces in the Southern TMO, excepting those in Afghanistan, are maintained in peacetime at low readiness. Most divisions are manned at one-quarter or less of war authorized strength.
- Force preparations would entail some postmobilization training once mobilized reservists were available.
- We judge that the amount of time required by the ground forces to complete personnel mobilization, equipment preparation, and post-mobilization refresher training would be at least four to six weeks. In preparation for the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviets spent some three months in mobilization, rehearsals and pre-invasion training to prepare invading troops for a much smaller operation.

The Soviet ground force posture opposite Iran has remained largely unchanged since the invasion of Afghanistan. Equipment modernization has proceeded slowly, and Soviet forces in this region are only now receiving the T-62 tank (a model now largely phased out of Soviet forces in Central Europe) and small amounts of self-propelled artillery. There has been some growth in total equipment holdings as understrength Soviet units have received

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additional equipment through "trickle-down" from better-equipped units opposite NATO. Two low-strength motorized rifle divisions have been added to the force since 1979. [redacted]

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Soviet air force units that would be used in operations against Iran are kept at a higher state of combat readiness than the ground forces in the Southern TMO; thus, they would require less mobilization and preparation before engaging in offensive operations.

- Tactical air regiments in the theater have a total of nearly 1,300 combat aircraft.
- In addition, there are nearly 500 helicopters available in the Southern TMO to carry out combat and logistics operations.
- Tactical air regiments typically are equipped with older aircraft such as the MIG-23 Flogger and SU-17 Fitter, but one regiment in the Transcaucasus Military District has received the newest fighter, the MIG-29 Fulcrum. [redacted]

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Since 1980, the Soviets have been increasing the number of ground attack aircraft in the Southern TMO by activating new ground attack regiments and converting some fighter regiments to the ground attack role. Consequently, the theater now has more ground attack aircraft than any other except that opposite NATO's Central Region. [redacted]

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#### Soviet Military Planning

The Soviets could conduct a variety of military campaigns against Iran. The objectives of the campaign and the risks the Soviets were willing to take would largely determine the forces to be allocated, the manner in which the campaign was conducted, and the preparations that would precede it. Because the Soviets tend to leave little to risk, they are conservative in assessing force requirements and thorough in planning and preparing for military operations. We do not foresee circumstances in which they would see an opportunity for a quick military action to significantly enhance their position with little risk. We believe that any military move would more likely be preceded by extensive and perhaps drawn-out deliberations within the Soviet political and military leadership. We judge, therefore, that the Soviets assume that Iranian resistance would be sufficient to prevent an easy victory, and they also would anticipate and prepare for US military intervention. [redacted]

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Before undertaking a campaign against Iran, the Soviets would have to make extensive preparations to ready their forces

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and combat support infrastructure for operations. We estimate that:

- The Soviets would require 20 to 25 divisions to undertake a general invasion of Iran.
- The forces would be brought up to wartime strength through a large-scale mobilization involving the callup of several hundred thousand reservists.
- The process of preparing ground forces for offensive operations against Iran and moving them to the Soviet-Iranian border would take more than a month.
- The logistics structure of the Southern TMO would have to be expanded considerably from its peacetime configuration including the requisition of thousands of trucks from the civilian economy for military use.
- Even with such preparations, a general invasion would still be an extremely difficult operation for the Soviets to execute because of Iran's highly constricted terrain and the difficulties in providing logistics support for Soviet forces far beyond the border region.

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#### Assessment of a Soviet Campaign

The amount of time the Soviets would require to carry out a campaign to overcome Iranian resistance and occupy Iran once combat commenced could range from several weeks to several months.

- The Soviets could seize the border regions of Iran relatively quickly, and after securing this area, might attempt to advance on one or two narrow axes towards the Persian Gulf or Gulf of Oman.
- If the Soviets encountered only Iranian resistance, we believe they would be able to reach the Gulf in as little as three weeks from the start of combat.
- A complete occupation of Iran would take up to several months. Difficulties encountered in achieving this objective would be the rugged and inhospitable terrain, the lack of adequate north-south and east-west axes of traverse, and the need to secure lengthy and vulnerable supply lines to support stationed Soviet forces.

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Soviet success would depend on the intensity, durability, and effectiveness of Iranian resistance and whether the Iranians

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received outside assistance. Even after conventional combat operations had ended, however, the Soviets would face the prospect of a long and costly occupation of the territory. In consolidating their control over the country, the Soviets would have to contend with guerrilla resistance that would be much stronger and probably more effective than the one they currently face in Afghanistan. The Iranians probably could resist the Soviets for years, especially if they obtained arms from abroad and could distribute them internally. [redacted]

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### Soviet Forces in Afghanistan

Pre-Invasion. Before the December 1979 invasion the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan consisted of a large contingent of approximately 3,000 military advisors. In the latter half of 1979 some small airborne units were introduced to the major airfield at Bagram to provide security.

1979-1980. The invasion force during the first year consisted of approximately 80,000 men. It included the main elements of three motorized-rifle divisions and two airborne divisions, as well as additional independent units to garrison cities in different parts of Afghanistan. Soviet fixed-wing aircraft were deployed at four main airfields--Shindand, Qandahar, Kabul, and Bagram--and helicopters were deployed there and at numerous secondary airfields. The aircraft included MIG-21s and SU-17s, along with several different types of helicopter--MI-8s, MI-24s, and MI-6s. [redacted]

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1986. By the middle of 1986 the Soviet military presence had grown to some 117,000 troops. The sham withdrawal in October 1986 did not include all six regiments specified by General Secretary Gorbachev, but did reduce Soviet forces by some 1,500-2,000 men belonging to the three air defense and one understrength tank regiments actually withdrawn. The largest concentration is in the east near Kabul, but garrisons have been established near most major cities and along the main roads throughout the country. There are approximately 125 fixed-wing combat aircraft and over 350 helicopters. The most important changes have included:

- Continual improvement of armor and artillery, including the introduction of advanced infantry-fighting vehicles and self-propelled artillery.
- The upgrade of MIG-21 fighter aircraft to MIG-23s, and the introduction of three squadrons--some 45 planes--of SU-25 ground attack aircraft.
- The initial introduction of Special Purpose Forces

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[redacted]

(Spetsnaz) battalions in 1983, and their growth by 1986 to a total of eight (some 4500 men). [redacted]

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Soviet Strategy. The main goals of Soviet strategy have been: 1) to secure the main cities and roads 2) to prevent the insurgents from concentrating forces and holding territory, and 3) to build up the Afghan army and security forces. Early in the war the Soviets were forced to concentrate on breaking up large insurgent groups. As the insurgents began to fight in smaller, less vulnerable bands, the Soviets experimented with various tactics, such as large combined-arms sweep operations, small-unit ambushes, and heliborne assaults. Much effort has been expended on securing the major cities, especially Kabul, and preventing attacks on supply, and Afghan forces have conducted regular sweeps in and around Herat to dislodge the mujahideen from their strong position in the city. In 1986 they erected numerous new security posts and began to raze parts of the old city, but fighting has continued. [redacted]

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Soviet and Afghan forces frequently conduct sweeps and raids near the Iranian border, trying to cut off the flow of arms. These have resulted in regular air violations and cross-border artillery shelling. On at least one occasion Iranian and Soviet aircraft engaged each other, with no known losses on either side. Iran has regularly protested such incursions to the Afghan government. In the last year the number of incidents appears to have dropped, possibly because Iran has allowed fewer supplies to be brought in for the insurgents. [redacted]

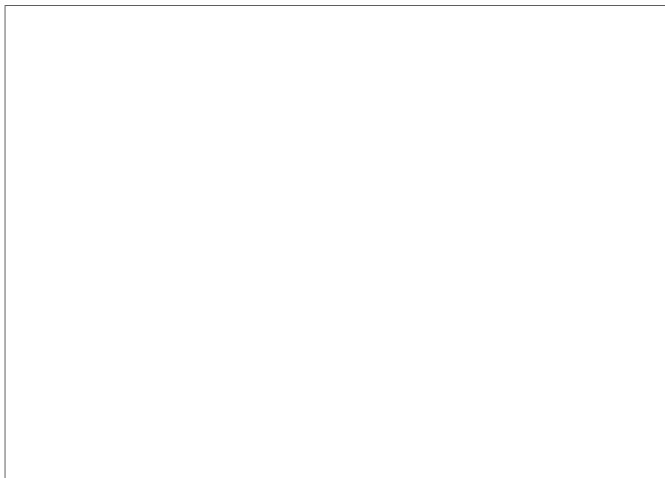
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