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15 August 1984

NOTE FOR: VC/NIC
FROM: Hal Ford
SUBJECT: Quick Thoughts About Threat Outlook II

Herb, a few brief ideas concerning possible nominees for our next edition of the Threat Outlook -- which will probably gear up during my absence. The DCI's "Threat" in the title has a certain constraining effect, but we can and should interpret "Threat" broadly in the interests of providing nourishing fare. Here are some possibles for Threat Outlook II (or later):

1. Major internal problems besetting Soviet policymaking. I personally don't believe that the intelligence and policymaking communities have given enough attention to certain major problems, internal to the Soviet system, which now are almost certainly severely constraining Soviet policymaking. Lots of attention is being given to how US and other foreign problems are frustrating Soviet leaders, etc., most recently examined brilliantly in Fritz's just-published NIE. But I would like to see a somewhat expanded and underlined treatment of the NIE's mention of the internal sources of Soviet conduct, this time in NIC judgments free of DIA's hangup that internal matters don't cut much ice. The purpose of such a Threat Outlook II edition: to give senior US policymakers a better grasp of some of the reasons the Soviets are behaving as they are, and to point up according US expectations, threats, and opportunities.

2. Chernenko, Gromyko, et al., are confronted not only with an aroused USA and a more threatening external scene, but with simultaneous major complications from within the system -- and it's the forces within the system that have always been paramount in shaping Soviet conduct, from Lenin to the present. At the moment the Kremlin's chief such problems are:

- An increasingly undisciplined and disruptive Eastern Europe, of which the greatest headache is the GDR and its various troubles.
- Almost certainly, still another succession problem at hand or in process, with a weak Chernenko (physically and politically), the others circling about positioning themselves for succession.

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- Pronounced policy differences over how to proceed, at home and abroad. Admittedly our evidence is not strong, but the signs are certainly there -- indicators which have proved out in past cases.
- All the myriad economic and social problems the USSR faces . . .

3. So-what? A Threat Outlook focused on these questions could give policymakers a fuller understanding of why the Soviets are being so difficult, and a better idea of what to expect from them, or not, over the next six months or so. That is, better understandings that:

- Soviet policy is on dead center not only because of US-dealt frustrations and the US election period, but because the many internal constraints now at work on the Kremlin leaders would be negating much policy movement in any event.
- A big maybe: The many problems confronting the USSR may make it -- in a total sense -- much weaker at the moment than its outward visage might suggest. Put another way, some months or years from now we don't want historians to look back and say that the US missed some opportunities (in negotiations, ploys, pressures, whatever) because it assumed the Soviets to be much stronger and policy coherent in mid-1984 than they actually were.

4. What are the trends in El Salvador? Here again there is lots of reporting of scattered military and political facts, some of which point up, some down. But except for committed policy types, no one is leaning back and telling US policymakers how things are going overall, what to expect six months or so from now, and -- especially -- what weaknesses in El Salvador need attending. We have an Estimate underway on this [redacted] [redacted], but its findings are weeks away. There is a good case for trying out some tentative judgments in a Threat Outlook soon. This would at least identify and point up what some of the central political and military points are, and begin the process of making analytic judgments on the state of progress, or not, in El Salvador. And, it would be a useful comparison to the views being given out nowadays by Pickering and Gorman: if our views all coincided, so much the better; if our views of progress differed from theirs, then we could task the intelligence community to dig into these questions all the more deeply.

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5. The Soviet military presence in Vietnam. Dave Gries told me he's thinking about nominating and writing up this subject for our Threat Outlook II. The facts of this Soviet buildup have been well reported. But no one has pointed up their significance. This latter is what Dave has in mind.

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