

May 29, 1981

SPECIAL ANALYSIS

USSR: Options in Dealing With Poland

Political turbulence in Poland is the Kremlin's most urgent and frustrating problem. It is urgent because the Soviets know that liberalization must be brought under control if they are to maintain hegemony in Eastern Europe. It is frustrating because Moscow has already used political and military pressure tactics short of armed invasion, without much success. Moscow, in effect, faces a no-win situation. The political, military, and economic costs of invading Poland would be enormous, but letting the situation continue to slip also carries major costs. [REDACTED]

It appears more likely that the liberalization trend will not be reversed and that Moscow eventually will move to bring the Poles to heel. What happens between now and the Polish party congress in mid-July will play a key role in Moscow's calculations. Moscow conceivably could tolerate a transformed Polish party, but only if party chief Kania gets the liberalization process under control and reassures the Soviets that the Poles will continue to honor their Warsaw Pact commitments. [REDACTED]

The Polish Party Congress

The process of liberalization has now spread to the Polish Communist Party itself, and that is new. The reforms already carried out come dangerously close to the kind of democratization that is anathema in the Soviet model of Communism. [REDACTED]

The Kremlin has urged Warsaw to postpone the congress, but the Poles insisted on going ahead. The Soviets have grave doubts that the Polish leaders are either willing or able to control the process. Moscow also realizes that, at this stage, it would be difficult--if not impossible--to replace Poland's leaders with stalwarts who could impose tougher policies. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

The only Soviet moves with real deterrent effect have involved the tangible threat of military intervention. The repeated use of this threat, however, can drain it of much of its potency. The Soviets may now reckon that if troops and tanks are readied the next time, they will have to be prepared to make good on the threat. [REDACTED]

Disincentives

Outright military intervention would carry enormous risks. The Soviets fear that some units of the Polish Army might resist. The economic cost of the invasion itself, and of keeping the Polish economy afloat, would be considerable. [REDACTED]

Moscow's attempt to block NATO's TNF modernization would founder. In addition, the USSR does not want its relations with the US to fall into a state of complete disrepair, and it does not want to bring about closer Sino-US ties. Moreover, Moscow does not want to lose access to Western credits, particularly the development of the gas pipeline from Siberia to Western Europe. [REDACTED]

These factors are not lightly dismissed. Those Soviet leaders who probably place most store by them also attribute some importance to the following considerations:

- Since Poland, unlike Czechoslovakia, lacks a common border with NATO countries, the threat to Soviet security interests can more easily be contained.
- No high Polish official has cast doubt on Poland's loyalty to the Warsaw Pact.
- A number of hardliners have thus far kept their places in the Polish party leadership. [REDACTED]

According to this argument, Poland has not yet reached the point of no return. It is thus prudent to give the Poles more time to sort themselves out. [REDACTED]

This line of reasoning apparently has prevailed so far in Kremlin councils. The Kania leadership conceivably may be able to reassert enough control to reassure Moscow and gain more time. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

Members of Solidarity recently have been willing to cooperate with government officials in calming particularly explosive situations. The Poles have long experience living in Moscow's shadow, and they will try to avoid giving the Soviets a pretext to intervene militarily. [REDACTED]

Narrowing Choices

The high level of ambiguity does make it harder for the Soviets to sort out and weigh their options. Over the past 11 months, those options have gradually been reduced to either watching carefully and admonishing the Poles--but deferring military action--or invading with overwhelming military strength. [REDACTED]

The continuing liberalization, which the party congress may well legitimize, could force the Soviets to make an unwelcome choice. They may conclude that failing to act decisively would mean forfeiting their last chance to preserve a Soviet-style Communist system in Poland, and that risk outweighs the probable costs of outright military intervention. [REDACTED]

Since last summer the Soviets have improved the preparedness of many of the forces that could be used to intervene. To ready an intervention force large enough to ensure success, however, the Soviets would still have to mobilize reservists and make large-scale logistic preparations. This process would take about two weeks. [REDACTED]