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June 19, 1981

SPECIAL ANALYSIS

USSR-POLAND: Moscow and the Polish Party Congress

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The more open differences between the Soviet and Polish leaderships, and the approach of the Polish party congress in mid-July--at which the liberalization trend should be ratified and most hardliners dropped from the Central Committee--are compelling developments to those in the Kremlin who would urge a prompt military move into Poland. Nevertheless, the absence of any significant military preparations to date suggests that the Soviets have not yet made a decision to invade before the congress. Moscow probably will intensify its political pressure--possibly in conjunction with military maneuvers--in a final effort to have the congress postponed, or at least to influence its deliberations. If such steps should fail, however, the Soviets would be left with little time to mount an invasion of the size they would deem necessary. It thus seems likely that in such a case Moscow would assess the outcome of the congress before making its next critical decision. [REDACTED]

The victory of reformers in the early elections for delegates to the congress appeared to surprise and alarm Soviet leaders. Moscow, with its support of the anti-"renewal" Katowice Party Forum, and its stern letter to the Polish Central Committee, was clearly setting the stage for an attempt by the Polish hardliners to stem the tide of liberalization and oust party leader Kania. [REDACTED]

Kania, however, outmaneuvered the Kremlin and its hardline supporters in the Polish party last week at the party plenum. The failure of the hardliners' bid created a new situation that puts Kania and the Soviet leadership directly at odds. [REDACTED]

The Soviets are now forced to search urgently for more effective ways to influence the Polish party. The potential alternatives, however, seem increasingly unlikely to work. [REDACTED]

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The Role of the Congress

The congress is procedurally and symbolically important. It will elect a new--and almost certainly more liberal--Central Committee, which will in turn choose a new Politburo. This process also will give significant additional legitimacy to the reform movement in the party. Perhaps the main determinant in the timing of the Soviet decision to invade Czechoslovakia in August 1968 was Moscow's determination to head off a similar extraordinary party congress that threatened to oust its remaining allies in Prague. [REDACTED]

The Kremlin will use various maneuvers to derail the congress. Although the hardliners failed to replace Kania at the plenum, many more participants spoke out against reformist trends and in support of the Soviets than at any time since Kania came to power last September. Even if these individuals are not reelected to the congress, they remain in office until 14 July. [REDACTED]

In concert with Moscow, they could manufacture a provocation, such as an incident similar to the one at Bydgoszcz, that would require the convocation of another plenum. Although they would use such a meeting to try again to outvote Kania and his supporters, their chances of success are slim. [REDACTED]

Other Soviet Tactics

Over the next few weeks, Soviet efforts to postpone the congress could include speeches by Soviet leaders directly critical of the Polish party or an even more threatening letter to the Polish leadership, this time from Politburo to Politburo or from Brezhnev to Kania. Moscow also could hold additional bilateral or Warsaw Pact summits, as well as Pact military maneuvers in and around Poland. [REDACTED]

The Soviet leaders still retain the option of intervening militarily to prevent the congress from taking place. Because it cannot count on Polish military cooperation or acquiescence, the USSR would be likely to prepare a force of at least 30 divisions to invade Poland. [REDACTED]

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To mobilize the reserves and prepare the logistics for such a force, the Soviets would need at least two weeks. Since they have yet to make any preparations of this sort, they would have to begin very soon to be ready before the congress opens on 14 July. [REDACTED]

Outlook

On balance, Moscow appears resigned, if its pressure tactics fail, to allow the congress to proceed rather than intervene militarily. Such a decision could stem from a calculation that the pressures on Kania--which have already impelled him to issue a strong warning against radical liberalization--will temper the reform trend at the congress. Or even if the Soviets are pessimistic about the outcome, they could reason that they should not make another move until they can assess the results of the congress and the new balance of forces in the party. [REDACTED]

After failing to get Warsaw to postpone the congress, the Kremlin could conclude that military intervention is essential. If this were the case, the Soviets would probably time their move based on military considerations, not political events. The congress could be declared null and void after an intervention. [REDACTED]

In any event, the depth of the rift between Moscow and Warsaw and the critical nature of the issues at stake for both sides could make the pre-congress period the most tense and unpredictable since the crisis began almost a year ago. [REDACTED]