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EXECUTIVE BRIEF

HOW VULNERABLE IS GORBACHEV?

- o With the removal of the "dead souls" from the Central Committee, Gorbachev has enhanced his ability to push reforms more aggressively and made it harder for his more orthodox opponents to remove him.
- o But the continuing bad news on the economy, the assertiveness of various nationalities, and the assault on the party apparatus during the recent elections have created serious frictions within the regime and could eventually lead to a major challenge to his position as well as his policies.
- o The intelligence agencies disagree over the probability of such a challenge during the next three or four years and also over the appropriate degree of confidence to attach to such assessments.
 - NIO/USSR, State/INR, DIA, and NSA, noting Gorbachev's recent political successes and continuing ability to push significant initiatives at home and abroad, are reasonably confident that his odds of remaining in power during this period are good (70-80 percent).
 - CIA/SOVA holds that the problems in the country are so serious and the political situation is so volatile that no judgment can be made with much confidence. It sees only a 50-50 chance of Gorbachev's surviving unless he retreats significantly from his reform policies.

This Executive Brief reflects the views of the Intelligence Community expressed at a warning meeting held 23 May 1989. It was drafted by the National Intelligence Officer for the Soviet Union and informally coordinated within the Community.

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HOW VULNERABLE IS GORBACHEV?

There is substantial agreement among the Intelligence Community agencies on most issues related to the Soviet leadership.

Most analysts agree, for example, that Gorbachev turned the recent elections to his favor and strengthened his position with the removal of the "dead souls" from the Central Committee at the April Plenum.

These changes show considerable ability to control the Politburo, make a move against him more difficult, and will help him push the reforms more aggressively.

There is a growing disparity, however, between Gorbachev's power to make personnel changes and his ability to demonstrate that his policies are making things better. Compromises on economic policy are very evident and more radical reforms have been put on hold.

The party apparatus is under challenge; nationality unrest is increasing and potentially could threaten the system; and economic policies have failed to improve the economy or the consumer's lot.

As a result, tensions within the regime and society have risen and could produce a challenge to Gorbachev's position as well as his policies.

There is a significant disagreement among agencies, however, on the probability of such a challenge over the next three to four years and the degree of confidence to place in such assessments.

NIO/USSR, State/INR, DIA, NSA, and some analysts from various agencies acknowledge that uncertainties are greater now but are reasonably confident that the odds of Gorbachev remaining in power over this period are good (70-80 percent).

-- They point to Gorbachev's political skills and the weakness of the opposition, the results of the Fall and April plenums, the continuing effort to press political reform, and the ability to push significant initiatives in foreign and security policy.

-- While acknowledging political risks inherent in some reform policies and the more volatile political and social environment in the USSR, they judge that these problems will likely be manageable and don't expect a crisis sufficient to cause Gorbachev's removal in this time frame.

-- They believe that support for change at home (evident in the elections) and Gorbachev's foreign policy successes have substantially increased the stakes and cost of a challenge and made one less likely.

Alternatively, CIA/SOVA and other analysts believe the political situation is now so volatile that no judgment about Gorbachev's position beyond the next few months can be made with much confidence.

- While recognizing Gorbachev's strength and skill, they see an intensification of the leadership struggle and resistance to his policies becoming more open and threatening.
- The threats to order unleashed by Gorbachev's reforms along with the seeming intractability of the economic problems confronting the country are in their view creating a very unpredictable environment in which events could readily spin out of control and give Gorbachev's more orthodox opponents the upper hand.
- While not arguing that such an attack will necessarily happen, they believe the conditions are right and the threat is already great. They see only a 50-50 chance of Gorbachev's surviving unless he retreats significantly from his reform policies.

Indicators

These two views reflect different perspectives on what and how evidence should be weighed and evaluated.

Those who hold a more upbeat assessment of Gorbachev's prospects consider the broader setting of leadership politics today, but rely more on indicators of power in the Krémelin--ability to make personnel changes, trends in

policy, the exercise of responsibility--as well as foreign policy accomplishments and domestic policy initiatives as the keys to assessing staying power. Had Gorbachev not scored dramatic successes last fall and more recently, Gorbachev's prospects would not look so solid to this group.

The other view is shaped more by the greater volatility of the political and social scene now than in the past, the mounting domestic criticism of Gorbachev's policies, the failure to show positive results from his program, and the lessons of Khrushchev's ouster. While agreeing that Gorbachev scored a major victory in May, they focus more on the unpredictable and risky environment his policies have created.

Short of Gorbachev's removal or significant decline in power, this disagreement will likely persist.

In effect, the more dramatic nature of change in the Soviet Union and the turmoil it has created have cracked the earlier consensus on how best to judge Gorbachev's prospects.

