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**The Readiness of Soviet  
General Purpose Forces  
Through the 1990s**

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# The Readiness of Soviet General Purpose Forces Through the 1990s

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] the Defense Intelligence Agency. The Memorandum was coordinated throughout the Intelligence Community by the National Intelligence Officer for General Purpose Forces.

# Key Judgments

## The Readiness of Soviet General Purpose Forces Through the 1990s

Soviet readiness requirements are being shaped by changes in doctrine, physical movements of forces out of Eastern Europe, internal conditions within the USSR, developments in arms control, and the demands imposed by increasingly sophisticated weaponry. In general, theater forces will be fully capable of supporting requirements for strategic defense of the homeland. However, timelines for committing forces for offensive operations against NATO are being significantly extended.

The Soviet military faces significant constraints, which will degrade its overall force readiness. Among the most severe disrupting influences are the disruption associated with reductions and relocations, the increased nationalistic tendencies, the budgetary reorientation from the military to the civilian sector, and the military's increasing uncertainty of its role in Soviet society.

In the mid-1990s, Soviet Ground Forces will continue to be the least ready branch of the armed forces. The Soviets will continue to emphasize mobilization potential over immediate force readiness and will probably vary their unit force structure and equipment holdings to preserve mobilization potential. We believe that the Soviets will maintain about the same ratio of ready to not-ready forces as they have in the past—about 40 percent of the total number of divisions in the Atlantic-to-the-Urals (ATTU) zone will be ready. Most of these divisions will be manned at category B. Remaining divisions probably will be kept in the status of cadre or mobilization-base (category C and D) readiness. Forces east of the Urals available for commitment against NATO will also be in low-strength status.

Combat elements of the Air Forces, Air Defense Forces, Navy, and surface-to-surface missile units will continue to be highly ready and manned at or near wartime levels.

The Soviets are continuing to debate the future manning policy of the armed forces. Recent statements by senior officers suggest growing acceptance of the idea that a more professional force is inevitable. We believe that the Air, Air Defense, Navy, and Strategic Rocket Forces will

be increasingly manned by volunteer forces. Although there will also be increased professionalization of the Ground Forces, mobilization requirements will dictate continuing the draft in modified form. In non-Slavic republics, the Soviets may allow the creation of formations of national units whose cadre of professionals would train the conscripts.

~~This information is Secret.~~

# Discussion<sup>1</sup>

## Changing Military Doctrine: War Goals, Strategy, and Readiness<sup>1</sup>

In the past Soviet military doctrine depicted war in Europe between the Warsaw Pact and NATO as a decisive clash between two social systems that would result in NATO's total defeat. The conflict would begin with conventional weapons and would probably escalate to a strategic nuclear exchange. Soviet theater strategy that developed from this view centered on rapid generation of a deep strategic offensive operation into NATO Europe. The Soviets emphasized surprise and preemption as well as mass and firepower; they would have preferred to attack before NATO was fully prepared.

To support this strategy, Soviet military planners emphasized high readiness of forward forces—both Soviet and selected Non-Soviet Warsaw Pact (NSWP)—and rapid mobilization of the remaining theater forces. Theater force posture and readiness were supported by logistic stockpiles deployed in forward areas, a command and control infrastructure, and large numbers of second-echelon and reserve forces from the western military districts (MDs) of the USSR.

New military doctrine and events in Eastern Europe have led to fundamental changes in Soviet theater strategy and significant modifications in readiness requirements. President Mikhail Gorbachev's program to restructure the Soviet armed forces involves, first and foremost, an adoption of a new military doctrine. The new "defensive" doctrine announced in 1987 is designed to reorient Soviet forces away from

<sup>1</sup> This paper addresses the readiness of Soviet general purpose forces in the mid-to-late 1990s. The paper assumes the cohesion of the Warsaw Pact will continue to decline and its survival as a military organization until the mid-1990s is highly unlikely; political pressures and mandated conventional arms control reductions will lead to the removal of most, if not all, of the Soviet Groups of Forces from Eastern Europe; CFE reductions will be fully implemented; and the Soviet leadership will continue the political and economic reforms under way at the beginning of the decade.

their traditional offensive posture and toward a less provocative defensive stance. This doctrine asserts that the primary Soviet goal is to prevent a war with the West and that the development of Soviet forces must be based on the concept of "reasonable sufficiency."

The Soviet political leadership probably has accepted the following propositions regarding war with the West:

- Soviet forces should not be postured to threaten the political existence of NATO member states (that is, both social systems will survive).
- Soviet forces will be postured to conduct defensive operations but will retain capabilities for operational-level offensives.
- Fighting should be confined to conventional operations and should not involve theater nuclear weapons.
- The purpose of strategic nuclear forces is to deter nuclear escalation, to contribute to Soviet superpower status and to fight nuclear war to achieve combat advantages if escalation occurs.

Theater strategy will change fundamentally in the 1990s. Wartime objectives no longer will require sustained, theaterwide offensive operations deep into NATO territory. Instead, the strategy will center on defending the homeland, preferably at forward positions in Eastern Europe. The degree of military cooperation that can be maintained with East European countries, particularly Poland, will be an important element in this strategy:

- The Soviets probably expect that East European forces will defend their own territory. Because such defensive operations would contribute to the USSR's ability to mobilize and deploy its forces, the Soviets may seek to reinforce with their own units

and to conduct counterstrikes aimed at expelling penetrating enemy forces and restoring the status quo ante.

- Soviet planners are likely to assume, as a "worst case," that an adversary will use East European territory for an attack on the USSR. Soviet strategic planning, therefore, will focus on a defense conducted at the western borders of the USSR.

#### Readiness Requirements

The Soviets can be expected to reshape the readiness of their forces to meet the following requirements:

- Abide by CFE restrictions.
- Maintain air, missile, and naval forces that can enter combat quickly.
- Man ground forces in the ATTU zone at sufficient levels to meet the timelines for mobilization. These timelines already have become extended over those required under certain scenarios in the 1980s because with the withdrawal of Soviet forces to their own borders East European countries will separate Soviet and NATO forces.
- Establish the capability to expand gradually the general purpose forces in the ATTU zone above CFE Treaty constraints if a threat materialized.
- Achieve higher standards for training units and individuals to enable them to cope with the growing complexity and sophistication of modern military equipment and fast-developing operations.

#### Constraints on Readiness

Soviet military leaders recognize that war fighting in the future will require better trained and equipped forces. However, Soviet theater forces will be engaged in a process of profound change far surpassing the massive demobilization and military reforms of the Khrushchev era. Managing this transition period will impair their readiness for at least the next 3 to 5 years. The changes will include:

- The discharge of hundreds of thousands of personnel.

- The need to provide employment and housing for thousands of officers and warrant officers and their families returning to the USSR, while the country is in the throes of economic decline.
- The deactivation or disbanding of scores of divisions and other military units.
- The removal, destruction, conversion to civilian use, dismantling, or placing into storage of tens of thousands of items of military equipment from units.
- The relocation of forces from Eastern Europe into the Soviet Union and the extensive movement of other units within the USSR.
- The reorganization and restructuring of many units, while they adjust to new organization and equipment.
- The management of a highly intrusive NATO inspection regime.

Throughout this transition period and into the next century, other constraints will undercut the readiness of future Soviet general purpose forces. These include:

- The rising level of draft resistance and desertions, particularly among ethnic minorities.
- The declining influence of political cadre in the armed forces.
- The persistent hazing of recruits.
- The trend toward abolishing certain forms of pre-induction military training and military-patriotic education in some regions and republics.
- Greater efforts to move weapons, equipment, and munitions currently used for training in remote facilities and schools into secure locations where they will not be misappropriated for ethnic strife.
- The high rejection rate of new inductees for military service.
- The growing numbers of non-Russian soldiers in the force.
- The growing numbers of young soldiers with no knowledge or poor knowledge of the Russian language (20 percent in 1989, according to Soviet figures).
- The growing divergence in views between the army's junior, midlevel, and senior officers.

- Sagging popular support for the armed forces and the dramatic increase in violent acts against military officers.
- The likelihood that one or more republics may gain independence over the next decade and thus necessitate additional force relocations and realignment of military plans, logistics, and organizations.
- The destabilizing potential of ethnic conflict in the USSR and the increasing involvement of the armed forces in internal security operations.

In view of the magnitude of the changes under way or anticipated and the imposing array of potential constraints, the Soviet military faces a logistic and management nightmare. We expect, therefore, that the readiness of the general purpose forces for theater-level military operations outside the Soviet Union will be significantly degraded in the 1990s.

**Readiness of the Soviet Ground Forces in the Future Manning.** Soviet military planners probably estimate that they will have time to prepare their ground forces for major combat. Nevertheless, they will be worried that air, naval, missile, and possibly some ground forces will become engaged relatively quickly. Although their future readiness requirements are not clear, we believe that the Soviets will maintain about the same ratio of ready to not-ready forces as they have in the past—about 40 percent of the total number of divisions in the ATTU zone will be ready. However, we believe that most of these divisions in the future will be manned at category B. The remaining divisions probably will be kept in the status of cadre or mobilization-base (categories C and D) readiness.<sup>2</sup>

Airborne, Air Defense, and surface-to-surface missile units will continue to be manned as highly ready forces. Economic considerations will require army and *front* nondivisional units to remain at relatively low levels of readiness. Anticipated extended time available for force generation will provide sufficient time for the mobilization and preparation of these units.

<sup>2</sup> Although unit readiness will not be limited directly by CFE, there will be indirect constraints on the number of ready divisions if the Soviets attempt to maximize the amount of equipment fielded in the western MDs. As much as one-third of the total Soviet equipment holdings in the ATTU zone could be held either in depot storage or in low-strength units comparable to low-strength cadre or mobilization-base divisions.

**The Non-ATTU Zone.** Forces outside the ATTU zone will not be constrained by the CFE Treaty. The Soviets are reducing forces in Central Asia and Mongolia, as well as along the Sino-Soviet border, in accordance with their program of unilateral reductions. They are converting some divisions into defensively oriented, machinegun artillery formations. We expect that these forces will maintain their present levels of manning and remain at the cadre level of readiness (category C) with selected formations at higher levels.

The Soviets are likely to maintain about a dozen active divisions east of the Urals that could be used as a strategic reserve. This strategic reserve would be able to reinforce formations within the ATTU zone or elsewhere in the country during a crisis period, but their movement into the ATTU zone would violate the CFE Treaty. These divisions, located in the eastern portion of the Turkestan MD and in Volga-Ural, Siberia, and Transbaykal MDs, probably will be manned at low-strength cadre status, with a few held at the reduced-strength ready level. In addition, significant amounts of major end items are currently in storage east of the Urals. These stockpiles are currently being augmented, and we cannot judge how much equipment would be available east of the Urals for forming divisions in 1995 or beyond. In any case, the structure and disposition of forces outside the ATTU zone will be an important element in determining Soviet options and capabilities.

**Equipment.** Soviet Ground Forces post-CFE will have less obsolete equipment and will probably modernize at about the same rate as they have in the past. During the 1990s, the Soviets are expected to deploy a new model tank, two new armored troop carriers, and four new artillery systems (operational-tactical short-range ballistic missile [SRBM], 203-mm gun-howitzer, a new 122-mm towed, and a new 122-mm self-propelled howitzer).

**Training and Leadership.** Public statements of Soviet military leaders reveal their intention to improve readiness by introducing new approaches to training, making more training resources available, and improving the quality of small-unit leadership.



These statements also suggest that—despite *perestroika* in the military—democratization in the ranks, initiative by low-level leaders, and the general morale of career military and conscripts have not improved. Soviet military leaders remain very concerned about the “fossilized” nature of training, especially its lack of creativity and initiative and its penchant for routine, stereotyped exercises. The decision to put all regimental commanders, and eventually all battalion commanders, through specialized field training courses is expected to improve the quality of the officer corps. This program, however, will take many years to achieve a noticeable increase in the quality of small-unit leadership and unit readiness. The Soviets have indicated that they will reduce the number and size of field exercises. The new training program will emphasize tactical level, opposed-forces exercises.

Although the Soviets have career enlisted and warrant officer personnel (*praporshchiki*), they are not comparable to the corps of experienced noncommissioned officers (NCOs) that is the acknowledged backbone of Western armies. Senior Soviet military leaders seem interested in creating such a corps. Nonetheless, producing a corps of NCOs that is capable of assuming greater responsibility for unit training and maintaining unit readiness will require sustained and concerted effort, as well as firm commitment at the top.

Limited evidence suggests that territorial or regional training centers are being established to improve the quality of training for reservists. These training centers, however, lack dedicated opposing forces and sophisticated training facilities.

Despite these efforts to improve leadership, we estimate that at least a decade of continued command emphasis will be necessary to develop the leadership by junior and NCOs that is necessary to ensure a high level of readiness. This task will be difficult to accomplish in light of the multiple constraints on increased readiness noted above.

#### Air Forces

The high state of readiness of Soviet air forces will be affected in the short term by moving aircraft, equipment, and materiel from the forward area to new

facilities, but aviation units will remain highly professional and manned at near wartime levels. If the Soviets retain some of the excess pilots and maintenance capability that results from arms control reductions, as is likely, then pilot-to-aircraft ratios and readiness may actually increase.

#### Naval Forces

The readiness of the Soviet Navy is expected to improve during the next decade. Similarly, if the Soviets retain the naval infantry forces, we anticipate that they will continue to be maintained as ready units. The improvements will result from changes in equipment, manpower, and, to a lesser extent, mobilization capability.

The Soviets have deleted from the naval inventory 99 warships, all at least 25 years old, since January 1989. This trend will continue throughout the decade but at a slower rate after 1995. These reductions, which save money and manpower, will not lower combat capabilities. New warships carrying more weapons, improved sensors, and better command, control, and communications systems will compensate somewhat for the decrease in the size of the Navy, and will make the Soviet Navy more modern.

The Navy faces a formidable deficiency in trained manpower that even a conscript service of three years for forces afloat does not meet. There is evidence that the Navy intends to move toward a more permanent manning system to include formation of a career NCO corps based upon voluntary enlistment. As a highly technical service, such problems as the lack of premilitary technical training, poor Russian language skills, and little desire for a military career affect the Navy even more than the Ground Forces. The Navy is reported to have decided, as an experiment, to offer a contract to selected new conscripts that includes technical training, 30 months of service after training, and the wages of a petty officer rather than those of a conscript.

The modernization of Soviet naval systems and equipment, as well as the higher level of training and combat readiness inherent in a more professional

force, will have a positive effect on the reserve forces and their mobilization capabilities over the long term. Nevertheless, training the reserves into effective counterparts of the active-duty forces will require a fundamental and time-consuming restructuring.

#### **Sustainability**

The political and military upheaval in the Warsaw Pact will bring about fundamental changes in the theater support infrastructure—logistics, C<sup>3</sup>, and unified air defense system. Over the long term, the political democratization of Eastern Europe and resulting erosion of the Warsaw Pact as a military alliance will probably lead to a theater support structure based largely on facilities within Soviet borders.

Soviet logistic plans and organization are being reshaped to support a strategic defensive operation that involves fewer forces and that does not extend beyond Pact borders. Large, static, easily targeted *front* rear bases become a liability, and this may be one of the reasons for the withdrawal of at least some of the large ammunition stocks from the forward area. A more decentralized logistic system will better protect supplies and support units, while giving lower-level commanders more reliable support during defensive operations. In a post-CFE environment, therefore, rather than provisioning tactical units and committing them to combat for three to five days, they will be expected to engage in combat for periods lasting, perhaps, twice as long.

CFE will also have a significant impact on the overall stockpile requirement. Current theater stockage levels will far exceed the requirements of a post-CFE force only about 50 percent as large as the current standing force. Furthermore, in the case of ammunition, the mix of munitions may need to change to more closely match that necessary for defensive operations. The introduction of improved conventional munitions into the inventory should drop the requirement further. As a result, reduction of stockpiles may be expected.

**The Debate Over Soviet Military Manpower Policy**  
Traditional manning policy reflected Soviet perceptions of the next war and the high priority the leadership placed on military power. Because military

planners contended that the initial period of war would be decisive, with little time for mobilization, and that rapid escalation was likely, the Soviets felt they needed a large standing army with important components kept at a high level of combat readiness. They also thought that war could be protracted and thus would require huge reserves of manpower. The military also was assigned the important social role of Sovietizing non-Slavs from among over 100 minority groups.

To meet manpower requirements for both a large standing army and a large pool of reserve manpower, the Soviets have relied on conscription. Soviet youth underwent a mandatory premilitary training program, were conscripted at about age 18, and were assigned to ethnically mixed units far from home. After serving two years (three years in naval afloat units), they were demobilized into the reserves to make up the massive mobilization base that doctrinal precepts demanded. The largely Slavic career force was responsible for turning the young conscripts into soldiers, preparing them for war, and keeping the complex military bureaucracy running.

This manning system entailed considerable costs to an already strained economy, but Soviet leaders were willing to bear them. During the 1980s, when the Soviets confronted increasing demographic constraints (the pool of 18-year-old males in 1988 had dropped 25 percent from its 1979 peak), they cut back student deferments to maintain the high force levels achieved during the manpower glut of the 1970s.

**Perestroika and Manning Policy.** Political leaders are considering major changes in the force inherited from the Brezhnev era. Economic considerations apparently are not the only factor behind the current debate on manning and restructuring. Many of the proposals under debate would not substantially lower costs; one of them—the proposed shift to a volunteer military—might cost more than the large conscript army it would replace.

The doctrinal developments dovetail with trends affecting military technology. They point toward a different kind of system than the large standing army

Gorbachev inherited. Integrating more sophisticated equipment into ground force units has increased the need for training and specialized skills. As the technological complexity of weaponry increases, overreliance on conscripts to man the armed forces impairs the use of weapons technology.

In addition, Gorbachev's political reforms are changing the nature of the policymaking system itself by bringing in new groups that are dubious about the strong commitment to military power of the previous leaders. For example, minority activists are hostile to the military in general and the draft in particular. Some regard the armed forces as a dramatic symbol of centralized Soviet power. Protests against the draft or against stationing Soviet forces on republic territory, have become more popular as a means of expressing minority demands.

The conscript army remains largely intact after nearly five years of *perestroyka*, but proposals being discussed involve the use of minority soldiers, modifications of draft policy, and proposals to replace the conscripts with a volunteer military.

*Use of Minority Soldiers.* Proposals under consideration would modify the tradition of assigning draftees to units far from home. Soviet legislators from many republics advocate home stationing for their conscripts. The party leadership in some republics has backed these demands.

Furthermore, activists from several regions have advocated formation of their own republic armies or national units analogous to those set up during the Civil War 70 years ago. (National units were phased out in the mid-1930s, resurrected during World War II, and phased out again after the war.)

Soviet military leaders have strongly opposed these proposals. They have agreed to some home stationing, but they contend that the distribution of manpower among the republics does not coincide with military needs. Moreover, home stationing would interfere with the ethnic mix of many military units and create units dominated by the resident minority.

Senior military leaders even more vigorously oppose the formation of national units or republic armies. Military leaders argue that reviving national formations is not feasible because of the nature of weapons technology and the need for training so many different military specialists. They also maintain that trying to manage the armed forces in numerous languages would be a command and control nightmare.

Military leaders also assert that concessions to minorities would exacerbate ethnic quarrels and promote resistance to Moscow's rule. As military officials have pointed out, the Armenian-Azeri confrontation, which is fueled by stolen weapons, would have become another Lebanon if the two republics had had their own divisions.

The resolution of this debate will be influenced by Soviet approaches to the nationalities problem. Most of the advocates of national units and home stationing of conscripts live in those non-Slavic republics most eager to secede from the USSR. If secessions occur, therefore, the Soviet army will become a smaller but more homogeneous force. On the other hand, to head off moves toward secession, Gorbachev has promised to work out a radically new relationship between Moscow and the union republics. These concessions may include allowing the formation of national units to be stationed at home.

*Draft Policy.* Other proposals would change policy toward conscription. The Soviet leadership—over the strong objection of the high command—has bowed to public pressure and reinstated the student deferment (phased out gradually in the early and mid-1980s) and applied it retroactively to those students already drafted. Also, under consideration, and opposed by military leaders, are proposals for alternative service for those draft-eligible persons who oppose military service on religious or moral grounds and for shortening the tour of service from two years to one. Several East European states already have reduced draft tours.

*Conscript Versus Volunteer Policy.* Senior Ministry of Defense and General Staff officials have argued against jettisoning the draft in favor of a volunteer military. They contend that a volunteer army would be too expensive and would preclude the development of a large mobilization base of trained reservists. Military leaders also point out that the move to a volunteer force would forgo the benefits of socialization that a conscript army provides.

Recent statements by senior officers suggest growing acceptance of the idea that a more professional force is inevitable. Rival draft laws on defense drawn up by the Ministry of Defense and the Supreme Soviet Committee on Defense and State Security both contain steps toward a more professional force. The introduction of an all-volunteer army would be more expensive; personnel and military construction costs would be increased to pay for salaries and "quality-of-life" improvements needed for such a military. As a result, resource constraints probably will limit the speed with which the Soviets could switch to an all-volunteer military if they chose to do so.

*Implications.* The resolution of these debates will have profound consequences for the structure of Soviet forces. Retaining conscription, while conceding to minority demands for home stationing and creating national units, would radically alter the ethnic composition of the military. Units with personnel drafted from Slavic areas would retain Russian as the command language. The high command would perceive them as more reliable and combat effective than troops from non-Slavic areas where the minority language probably would be used as the command language at least at the lower levels. A non-Slavic officer corps to provide leadership to minority units probably would be needed. Moreover, national units, or units dominated by the resident ethnic group, would have major consequences for relations between center and periphery; it would endow republic authorities with their own military forces. This strategy also would raise questions about procuring manpower for forces deployed beyond Soviet borders or for Soviet territory in the Far East, which has a limited conscription base.

Abandoning conscription in favor of a volunteer system would have a different set of implications. The volunteer force (in view of the expense of attracting them) probably would be much smaller and more Slavic. The career enlisted contingent and the NCO corps would need to expand. Given sufficient funding to offset quantitative reductions by qualitative improvements, the result would be a smaller but highly capable force. The high command's resistance to a professional military probably stems from lack of experience in fielding a streamlined, technically sophisticated military and an awareness that achieving qualitative excellence is not a Soviet strong point.

We believe that manpower policies in the Soviet armed services gradually will accommodate the various positions now under discussion. The Soviets are likely to move toward a more professional military, but their requirements for mobilization will dictate continuing the draft in modified form. We anticipate that Air, Air Defense, Naval, and Strategic Rocket Forces increasingly will be manned by volunteer soldiers; conscripts will be used in the least skilled positions.

Similar patterns of manning probably will occur in the ground forces; missile, airborne, and other units will need highly skilled volunteer soldiers, as will units located in remote, sparsely populated areas and in selected maneuver divisions. Most of the cadre-manned formations—including machinegun artillery divisions—can be maintained as a territorial militia. In non-Slavic republics, the Soviets may allow formation of national units whose professionals would train the conscripts.

Active service for conscripts is likely to be shortened. Once their service is completed, conscripts would return to their homes for assignment to a nearby reserve unit; they would be called up annually for several weeks of training over an extended period. This system would resemble that of the Red Army during the decade beginning in the mid-1920s, when national policy also emphasized economic regeneration, security through defense, and political change.

The reforms required to achieve an effective NCO corps—personal initiative, imaginative and effective training, and “democratized” relations between ranks—are fundamental and will require many years for results. Yet such reforms are essential to the creation of a viable professional military. The unprecedented level of public criticism of military life and heavy political, social, economic, and military constraints suggest that implementing military reform in the USSR will be a slow and difficult process.

These constraints will impair the readiness of Soviet general purpose forces throughout the CFE reduction period and into the next century. Theater forces will be fully capable of supporting the reduced requirements of the new doctrine of strategic defense of the homeland. But the readiness of Soviet general purpose forces for theater-level military operations outside Soviet borders will be significantly degraded during the extended period of dramatic adjustments that *perestroyka* continues to require.

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