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Soviet Premier Kosygin's
Foreign Policy Role

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Summary and Conclusions

Soviet Prime Minister Aleksey Kosygin's political position has slipped considerably over the past ten years. [his retirement or ouster from the leadership may be in the offing. Nevertheless, until now, he has remained a key Soviet policymaker. Although he was supplanted by Brezhnev as the Soviet Union's principal foreign policymaker over seven years ago, he remains actively involved in formulating and executing Soviet decisions on the international scene.]

In general, Kosygin's foreign policy views correspond fairly closely with the prevailing leadership consensus. He is, however, an independent

This research paper analyzes Soviet Prime Minister Aleksey Kosygin's role and influence on Soviet foreign policy. It discusses his views on Soviet policy towards the US, China, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Comments are welcome

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thinker and has at times staked out a position ahead of or at variance with others in the leadership. He was the first Soviet Politburo member to argue publicly for a limitation of strategic arms. He has on occasion sharply disagreed with leaders such as Suslov about the historic direction of Soviet-American relations, emphasizing that the relationship has moved from one of confrontation to one of negotiation and detente. His opposition to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and his reluctance to criticize or even speak out on problems in Moscow's relationship with Western Communist parties, have suggested a somewhat greater tendency toward moderation than is characteristic of many of his Politburo colleagues. On issues such as the Middle East or China, however, there appears to be little substantive difference between Kosygin and other leaders.

If Kosygin should leave the leadership within the next six months or so, his departure would probably not have an immediately visible effect on Soviet foreign policy positions. Brezhnev has, in most respects, endorsed Kosygin's viewpoint on Soviet-American relations, and would probably have sufficient political strength to continue the main line of current Soviet policies in this area.

Nonetheless, Kosygin's departure would remove a senior leader closely identified with improving Soviet-US relations. It is not at all certain that any of the most likely replacements have the same degree of commitment to this policy. Kosygin's disappearance would thus be likely to have some affect upon marginal Soviet decisions regarding the US. In any case, where present leadership views on particular points at issue with the US may be finely balanced, and where some differences may exist within the Politburo as to the range of concessions to the US consistent with Soviet interests, Kosygin's departure could mean at least a slight hardening of the Soviet consensus.

Kosygin's Influence in International Affairs

Premier Kosygin has had an active role in the formulation and execution of Soviet foreign policy since 1964. From the beginning of the post-Khrushchev era, however, the two other members of the leadership troika, initially Brezhnev and Mikoyan and eventually Brezhnev and Podgorny, shared foreign policy responsibilities with him. At first Brezhnev, as the party leader, concentrated on relations with allied countries in Eastern Europe; Podgorny, after assuming the presidency in December 1965, focused on relations with Africa and the Middle East. Kosygin, on the other hand, paid particular attention to relations with South and East Asia, the Middle East, Western Europe, and the US. He presided, for example, over Soviet efforts to mediate the Indian-Pakistan dispute in 1966.

While this division of labor was highly favorable to Kosygin's image as Brezhnev's co-equal during the first years of the new team, [] their relationship was a contentious one. [] On the one hand, Kosygin attempted to preserve public discussion of relations with non-communist states for himself. Brezhnev, on the other hand, is known to have been dissatisfied with Kosygin's performance in international negotiations--for example, in discussions with President Johnson at Glassboro in June 1967 and with British Prime Minister Wilson in Moscow in January 1968. He actively sought to limit Kosygin's authority and freedom to maneuver.

As Kosygin's political status in relation to Brezhnev declined, so also did his responsibility for the conduct of foreign affairs. Brezhnev gradually replaced him as the country's principal spokesman on foreign policy. Brezhnev now makes almost all of the prestigious foreign visits; Kosygin has not visited

a major Western capital since 1967. Brezhnev also assumed responsibility for directing Soviet-US arms limitation negotiations; Kosygin has not signed a joint communique on this subject since May 1971. In addition Kosygin's stature was further diminished by the expanded foreign policy role given Podgorny, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia.

In spite of the decline in his foreign policy influence, Kosygin's governmental role confers considerable foreign affairs responsibility upon him. He still travels occasionally on important diplomatic missions. Moreover, he is frequently involved in high level negotiations in Moscow. As a member of the USSR Defense Council he participates directly in formulating the USSR's overall defense and strategic posture. He also still has principal responsibility on questions pertaining to foreign trade and economic relations. Thus, while he no longer rivals Brezhnev in influence on foreign policy decisionmaking or in the scope of responsibility in this area, he nonetheless remains a major participant in the formulation and execution of policy.

Soviet-American Relations

Kosygin has been a consistent proponent of improved Soviet-US relations. He has particularly supported proposals designed to ease tensions and control the arms race between the two superpowers. While he has not stood alone within the Soviet leadership in advocating such steps, he probably bore much of the early burden in convincing others within the leadership to support this position. Ironically, as the likelihood of reaching agreements with the US increased and as Soviet support in principle for such accords grew, Kosygin was relegated to a secondary role in promoting the Soviet position, while Brezhnev became its chief spokesman.

A consensus within the Soviet leadership to pursue agreements with the US on a wide range of issues developed only gradually. Kosygin apparently became convinced shortly after the Glassboro talks with President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara that further Soviet-American efforts to limit the strategic arms race by mutual agreements were in the Soviet interest. [] told [] in [] 1968 that Kosygin, after his return to Moscow, had ordered the preparation of a study on the arms race in spite of military objections. In July 1968, at the ceremony for signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and only one month after Foreign Minister Gromyko had broached the idea publicly, Kosygin became the first Politburo member to endorse a policy of seeking an agreement on the "limitation and subsequent reduction of the means of delivery of strategic weapons" with the US. He repeated his endorsement on several occasions thereafter. Most other Soviet leaders remained quiet on the subject in this early period.

Kosygin's public endorsement of arms limitations corresponded closely with the views he expressed privately. He discussed disarmament and arms limitation at length during a meeting with former Secretary of Defense McNamara in November 1968--a meeting requested by Kosygin. Kosygin, according to McNamara, showed far more interest in these subjects than he had at Glassboro 18 months earlier. In his conversation with McNamara he noted that disarmament was an "imperative necessity" and the only alternative to "insanity and war." He asserted that serious negotiations to bring about a general lessening of tensions and a gradual solution to disarmament problems were essential. He assured McNamara that the USSR would cooperate in trying to achieve these objectives.

Over the next six years, however, the strength of Kosygin's support for improved Soviet-American relations varied considerably. Both domestic and international circumstances initially made forceful

advocacy of improved relations politically sensitive. Some Soviet leaders, including Suslov, Podgorny and Shelest, appear to have been particularly suspicious of efforts to improve the relationship. In addition, Vietnam and the situation in the Middle East created obvious difficulties for any such effort. Kosygin therefore appears to have become somewhat defensive about the US during the late 1960s and very early 1970s. In his 1971 election speech, for example, he explicitly linked the failure to improve US-Soviet relations with US policies in Vietnam and the Middle East.

We cannot draw some kind of line between our bilateral relations and the aggressive policy of imperialist circles of the United States, the barbarity committed in Indochina by US troops, the disregard for other peoples, and the crude trampling of their lawful rights and interests. Soviet-American relations cannot but be negatively affected by such acts of the US as practical support for the expansion of Israel in the Middle East and opposition to the lessening of tensions in Europe.

Nevertheless, throughout the difficult period from 1969 until 1972 he continued to advocate the need for a better relationship with the US. "Good relations," he said, "would correspond with the interests of peace as a whole." In contrast, more ideologically-oriented figures such as Suslov tended to emphasize instead the "great danger" posed by "American imperialism," the need to "continuously perfect the defense of the country and arm the Soviet army and navy with the most modern weapons," and the importance of continued vigilance against "perfidious imperialist plans."

From 1972 on, the political atmosphere in the Kremlin changed dramatically, as the prospects for reaching agreement with the US on arms limitations improved. Kosygin's analysis of the international

situation was no longer so defensive. He became more optimistic about future relations with the US and positive about the advantages of the improved relationship. In 1974, for example, he disagreed sharply with Suslov's characterization of relations with the West as "unceasing confrontation." On the contrary, Kosygin asserted that there had been a historic change in Soviet-American relations from "confrontation to negotiation and detente." In Kosygin's view the improvement in Soviet-US relations, rather than being hindered by developments in other parts of the world, was creating a good environment for resolving international problems. "Were it not for the relaxation of tension," he noted, "events [the October 1973 Middle East war] would only likely have assumed a far more dangerous outcome."

Although Kosygin has pushed for improved Soviet-US relations in their own right, he appears to believe that improvement would be salutary for two reasons related to his economic policy views. First, he apparently favors the diversion of resources from military expenditures to the civilian economy. He has noted on more than one occasion that the arms race has resulted in a great waste of resources needed for social purposes. Without stable, non-confrontational relations with the US, however, any attempt to convince other leaders of the wisdom of shifting resources away from defense would be extremely difficult and politically imprudent.

Second, Kosygin favors expansion of scientific and technical cooperation and trade with developed industrial countries, particularly the US. Kosygin believes the economy must be modernized and labor productivity improved. In his view, improved economic relations with the West would assist both objectives. In 1968, he remarked that "no single country can develop in isolated conditions without extensive collaboration and scientific and technical exchange in various spheres."* Subsequently, in his meeting with

**This statement was made only 18 days after he expressed his initial support for a strategic arms limitation agreement.*

McNamara in November he expressed particular interest in obtaining the assistance of US firms in expanding Soviet truck production capability.

Obviously, however, problems have occurred both at home and abroad which have inhibited development of economic ties. Within the Soviet Union the wisdom of seeking expanded economic ties generally and Western technology specifically has been debated. Brezhnev, for example, in the spring of 1968 disagreed sharply with Kosygin's view. He argued that "some workers obviously underestimate the achievements of scientific-technical thinking in our country and in other socialist countries. At the same time, these people overestimate the achievements of science and technology in the capitalist world." Kosygin, in spite of this rebuke, was undeterred. In 1971 Kosygin told a visiting delegation [] that some "old timers" in the USSR did not approve of or understand the need for international industrial cooperation. In his 1975 election speech Kosygin himself alluded more in sorrow than in anger, to US trade laws that discriminated against the Soviet Union and hindered the development of economic relations. Despite these difficulties, Kosygin has continued to insist that the problems encountered in Soviet-US economic dealings could be overcome and that detente was the key to achieving this objective. "The relaxation of international tensions is contributing to the development of the USSR's economic, scientific, and technical cooperation with the countries of the capitalist world...Stable economic, scientific, and technical links are making it possible to utilize on a wide scale the advantages of the international divisions of labor in the interest of the national economy."

Even though Kosygin supports improved Soviet-US relations in general and strategic arms constraints in particular, it is not clear how much movement from the current Soviet position he would advocate to reach an agreement. There is no information about his views on specific issues being negotiated at SALT. He has for some years argued, like Brezhnev, that agreements should be based on the principle of

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equality, providing neither side with unilateral advantages. While there is insufficient evidence to judge how he would apply this ambiguous criterion in varying circumstances, it seems likely that he shared the general Politburo reaction to the March 1977 US SALT proposals as being "unequal" and unacceptable.

Sino-Soviet Relations

The Soviet leaders have adopted a tough stance toward the People's Republic of China during the Brezhnev period. They have been uncompromising in their refusal to acknowledge the validity of any Chinese charges against them. At the same time, they acknowledge their desire for more normal relations if the Chinese become more cooperative and from time to time make gestures such as halting their polemical attacks against Peking.

Kosygin has supported this position faithfully. He has, however, adopted a more temperate tone in his public discussion of the Chinese problem than some other Soviet leaders. While reciting such standard Soviet charges against the Peking leadership as anti-Sovietism and anti-detente policies, he has usually avoided personal denunciations of Chinese leaders or the threatening rhetoric employed by some in the Kremlin hierarchy. Moreover, he, like other Soviet leaders, has customarily voiced the professed Soviet desire to negotiate a solution to the border problem and normalize state-to-state relations.

The Chinese have asserted that Kosygin actually made concessions in meetings with them in 1969 which Brezhnev subsequently vetoed. There is no evidence to support the Chinese contention. In fact, the Chinese have consistently misrepresented Kosygin's negotiating posture of moderation to embarrass and attack the CPSU and specifically Brezhnev, the chief Soviet spokesman on this question.

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Kosygin's public moderation should not be overemphasized. [

UJ]. There is no indication that he disagrees with the prevailing leadership consensus. He probably would oppose, however, policies that could heighten tensions and lead to military conflict.

Soviet Policy in the Middle East

Kosygin has been closely involved with the formulation and execution of Soviet policy in the Middle East. He has visited most of the major countries in the area. Moreover, he was a Soviet trouble-shooter during the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israel wars. During the 1967 war, he was involved with Brezhnev in hotline discussions with President Johnson; later he personally presented the Soviet position during the UN debates on the problem. In 1973 he made a hasty visit to Cairo to persuade Egyptian President Sadat to accept a cease-fire.

Yet Kosygin's role and influence on Middle Eastern policy generally declined as Brezhnev's foreign policy stature rose. During the 1973 war, for example, Brezhnev clearly emerged as the principal Soviet leader--undertaking the main initiatives, arranging vital meetings, and supervising most policy discussions. Nevertheless, Kosygin has remained actively involved in this foreign policy area. He visited Libya in 1975 and Syria and Iraq in 1976--countries which had assumed increased significance for the USSR as Soviet-Egyptian relations deteriorated. It then became Kosygin's task to voice Soviet discontent to the Syrians over the Syrian intervention into the Lebanese civil war.

There appears to be little substantive difference between Kosygin's views concerning developments in the Middle East and those of his colleagues. He almost certainly supported the increased Soviet military and political involvement in the area following the 1967 war. He has also advocated a political solution to the

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Arab-Israeli dispute. Like his associates he insists that a political settlement include withdrawal of Israeli forces from all occupied Arab lands, guarantees of security for all states in the region, and recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians.

Even though a general leadership consensus exists on the major issues, there is some evidence that Kosygin and Brezhnev have at various times in recent years been less inflexible and somewhat less ardent in support of Arab interests than their former colleague, Podgorny. Since the October 1973 war, both leaders have supported the Palestinians' right to their own state, but only some months after Podgorny first broached the idea in October 1974. Kosygin, in addition, has acknowledged more explicitly than any other Soviet leader that Israel would have to receive border guarantees in a political settlement.

In spite of the serious difficulties Soviet policy has encountered in the Middle East in recent years, there is no indication that Kosygin favors a major shift in that policy. He has, however, expressed his frustration, laced with bitterness, about developments in the region. He thus acknowledged [] [] last year that the US had gained the upper hand in dealing with Egypt, the former cornerstone of the Soviet presence in the Middle East, and blamed Egyptian President Sadat for this turn of events. Kosygin apparently hopes that this reversal can be offset by strengthening ties with Syria, Libya, and Iraq, a policy he has had a major role in implementing. Yet, the unhappiness expressed by Kosygin over the deterioration of relations with Egypt indicates that he, and probably other Soviet leaders, are convinced for the present that Soviet interests have not been well served by this arrangement.

Soviet Relations with Eastern Europe

The original division of labor among Kremlin leaders as well as Kosygin's institutional responsibilities have combined to limit his involvement with

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ruling and non-ruling Communist parties. Yet, in some areas at least, he has played a significant role. He has been responsible for coordinating bilateral economic relations with the East European states and has also been concerned with CEMA problems. In addition, he has occasionally become directly involved in political issues affecting Soviet relations with various Warsaw Pact countries. In early 1968, for example, he was involved in Soviet attempts to reach a political solution to the growing Czechoslovak crisis; later he helped to negotiate the treaty which provided for the stationing of Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia. His contacts with representatives of nonruling Communist parties, on the other hand, are virtually nonexistent.

Flexibility and pragmatism characterize Kosygin's general approach toward relations with Eastern Europe. While he has on occasion discussed the importance of unity within the "socialist community" and even attacked the Chinese for attempting to split it, Kosygin has not given great attention to this problem. Moreover, he rarely uses the term "proletarian internationalism," code words intended by conservative ideologues like Suslov to signal Moscow's continuing ambition to dominate as much as possible of the world Communist movement.

Kosygin's reaction to developments in Czechoslovakia in 1968 reflects his basically moderate viewpoint concerning Moscow's relations with Communist states. The decision to invade Czechoslovakia in August 1968 sharply divided the Soviet leadership. Although the position of some Soviet leaders on this question remains conjectural, there is little doubt about Kosygin's viewpoint; he was firmly opposed to military intervention. Prior to the invasion, Kosygin avoided any mention of the burgeoning crisis. His one public discussion of the issue contained no threatening or hostile rhetoric about developments in Czechoslovakia. Rather, during a news conference in Sweden in July 1968, he emphasized that he was confident that the Czechoslovak Communist Party would yield its leading role to no one and that

the Czechoslovak people and Communists would "rebuff" any attack on the socialist character of the state. Podgorny, in contrast, only one week later

stressed precisely what Kosygin had indicated was not a problem; namely, the leading role of the party was endangered and socialism in Czechoslovakia was being threatened. After the invasion Kosygin reportedly remonstrated to Brezhnev that the intervention had succeeded primarily in creating popular unity in Czechoslovakia, sarcastically implying that the unity was based on anti-Soviet hostility. Kosygin also appears to have had more confidence in the Czechoslovak leadership than some of his associates.

he had had a friendly, relaxed relationship with Czechoslovak Premier Oldrich Cernik, who was arrested by the Soviets during the first hours of the invasion. This personal relationship with Cernik continued even after the invasion. Moreover, even as late as February 1969--two months before First Secretary Dubcek was removed from office--Kosygin was reliably reported to have privately described him to other leaders as a "good socialist."

Kosygin, therefore, cannot be closely identified with the prevailing leadership view concerning relations between the USSR and Eastern Europe. While he may have been a moderating force at times, his influence has clearly been limited. He has traditionally deferred to Brezhnev's leadership in this area. At the same time, Kosygin has not had an active role in monitoring Soviet relations with non-ruling Communist parties. Nevertheless, just as he indicated opposition to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, so he has also indicated by his silence--in sharp contrast to Podgorny and Suslov--his reluctance to endorse the tough line taken recently by the Kremlin toward Eurocommunism. In neither case has he evidently had sufficient influence to prevent the formation of a leadership consensus favoring a harsher policy than he thought advisable.