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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
National Foreign Assessment Center  
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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Brezhnev Trip

This paper examines why a 71-year-old man who has just passed a winter of uncertain health would embark in late March on a 4,300 mile, 12-day, bone-rattling trip by rail from Moscow to Vladivostok.

It concludes that the trip underscores the importance the regime attaches to its resource-rich provinces and reflects the genuine concern that exists in Moscow over reports of wasteful mismanagement in these distant regions. The trip also provided an opportunity for a first-hand inspection of the state of civilian and military morale in these remote outposts and offered a chance to review combat readiness of forces positioned to counter any future threat from China.

As important as all these reasons are, the paper questions the need for Brezhnev to have become personally involved in such an arduous journey. It speculates that Brezhnev chose to go because he perceived the need--after a winter of relative inactivity--to demonstrate his ability to play a vigorous leadership role.

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*This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Regional and Political Analysis. Comments on it are welcome and may be addressed to*

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CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM  
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The Brezhnev Image

It seems reasonable that after Brezhnev's uncertain health and absence from view this winter, he and those around him thought it necessary to demonstrate that the General Secretary was still capable of leading the country. [ Brezhnev was

said to have complained [ about the talk in the west of the "post-Brezhnev era." Such talk undoubtedly has surfaced in domestic circles as well. ]

The last time many of the important regional party and government officials saw Brezhnev was at the December plenum, when he was probably not in very good shape. It was even rumored that Brezhnev did not deliver his speech, as the press reported, but that it was read by his unofficial deputy Andrey Kirilenko. Even if these rumors are not true, their existence in itself reflects uncertainty surrounding Brezhnev's capabilities.

During his subsequent absence through the month of January, rumors spread that Brezhnev was critically ill, and as if to demonstrate their ability to conduct business as usual, those standing in for him seemed to be playing a more assertive role than on past occasions when he was ailing. Although Brezhnev returned to his regular schedule in February, the unusual handling of a series of birthday awards to several of the younger Politburo contenders indicated that political maneuvering with an eye to the succession had picked up and that it was not all going the way Brezhnev wanted.

Against this background, the Trans-Siberian odyssey appears as a bold and politically astute scheme to put Brezhnev back in the center of things. It demonstrated to officials at home and abroad, as only a grueling whistle-stop tour could, that talk of the post-Brezhnev era is premature.

We know from [ ] however, that the effort to achieve this image was carried out with considerable care. [ ]

[ ]

There was some risk that these procedures would work against the image Brezhnev was trying to establish. At least twice during the trip, local party officials seeking to meet with Brezhnev had to be turned away.

[ ]

Economic Concerns

Brezhnev's long winter indisposition was potentially more politically damaging because it followed mounting concern among Soviet officials at all levels about the state of the economy. This concern boiled to the surface at the December plenum, which by all accounts rendered a very critical assessment of the situation.

The plenum approved an economic plan for 1978 whose goals for industry implicitly acknowledge that many important five-year targets are beyond reach. This recognition of the limitations besetting the economy is reflected in the tenets that Brezhnev, according to Pravda, advanced for meeting the situation. First and foremost, Brezhnev urged "the careful, rational use of all that we have at our disposal" and the conservation of metal, raw materials, electric power, and fuel. One active measure of the plenum that has come to light was a shift of resources to oil and gas development in Tyumen Oblast at the expense of enhanced recovery operations in the older Urals-Volga fields.

In retrospect, it seems likely that the plenum also decided that the party should play a more direct role in the management of government affairs. After the plenum, the role of party secretary Kirilenko in the economic sphere became more conspicuous, and his actions further raised the status of the party vis-a-vis the government in this area. Three conferences of party and government officials that were convened in the Central Committee and chaired by Kirilenko, for example, revealed new party

assertiveness in government affairs. They examined construction, the development of fuel-efficient engines, and the railroad system, focusing particularly on technology and an inter-sectoral approach to problems. The conference on railroads was accompanied by a Central Committee resolution approving a Leningrad initiative to improve transportation by allowing local party officials to coordinate economic activity across ministerial jurisdictions.

At this point, it appears that the increase in party involvement in government matters is more an exhortative effort than a prelude to new major economic decisions or actions in the near term. Brezhnev's performance during the trip seemed to typify that approach. He did not offer his audiences, in the speeches available to us, any new answers or proposals for dealing with their economic problems. He gave the impression of a leader on a fact-finding mission who wanted to rally enthusiasm and discipline in the Soviet Union's far-flung economic outposts. In response to complaints from local leaders about economic conditions, he offered some strong admonitions, directed as much to ministerial officials in Moscow as to officials on the spot.

It is possible that certain elements of the Soviet leadership sense that some changes are needed but are stymied because

- they cannot agree on what should be done, or
- they are meeting strong resistance from vested regional and organizational interests to any change.

Under these circumstances, Brezhnev might have concluded that he would be in a better position to understand, referee, and contribute to any future decision after he had made first-hand observations and contacts in Siberia and the Soviet Far East. If the economy continues to flounder, as seems likely, the pressure to "do something" will increase at a time when Brezhnev's political stamina may well be declining.

Military Aspects

The high-level military representation in Brezhnev's entourage was indicative of the high priority assigned to defense-related aspects of the trip. The military cast of the group also had political connotations. The presence of Defense Minister Ustinov--the only Politburo member to travel with Brezhnev--conveyed a graphic impression of unity of views between the two men. This picture of unity underlined the General Secretary's ties to and support from the military, an important element in his political strength. In addition, Brezhnev's speech from the deck of a cruiser off Vladivostok once again dramatized the General Secretary's role not only as chief spokesman for detente and SALT but also as Defense Council chairman, providing implicit reassurance to the domestic audience that Soviet defense capabilities would not be unacceptably weakened in treaty negotiations.

Ustinov's presence on the trip also gave rise to a new Moscow rumor that he is being groomed to replace Premier Kosygin, who has repeatedly been reported as wanting to retire. Kosygin is not acting like a man who intends to retire, however, having in late March made his own inspection tour of West Siberia.

The military "whistle stops" of the trip, meanwhile, seemed sufficient justification for the presence of Ustinov and several flag officers in the Brezhnev party. A number of defense installations were visited, and at least three exercises [ ]

[ ] Unlike Brezhnev's comments to industrial managers, [ ] his remarks at defense-related sessions gave the impression that the Brezhnev party was fully satisfied with what they saw. This is in accord with the Soviet leadership's reluctance to admit any kind of military weakness, but Brezhnev and Ustinov undoubtedly lectured their military hosts on the need to tighten discipline and on the importance of training and urged them to place more emphasis on the conservation of fuel and other resources.

The morale of the military personnel stationed in the Siberian hinterlands was not mentioned, but we suspect it is an issue that troubles the Soviet leadership. Reports from the MIG pilot who defected from Siberia in September 1976 indicated that living conditions for Soviet forces there were harsh and, when combined with their dreary day-to-day routine, had contributed to a very low state of morale.

Brezhnev did address this problem in appearances before civilian audiences during the trip. He told party leaders in Vladivostok that it was necessary to think a great deal about "how to secure cadres in the Far East." He complained about the "fluctuation of cadres" caused by shortages of housing and other amenities and urged local leaders to make warm clothing and other goods available for those who must work in difficult climatic conditions.

It seems likely that these issues were also discussed in private with local military commanders. This theme has lately figured prominently in military propaganda, both at a major military conference over which Ustinov presided in late December and in speeches Brezhnev and Ustinov delivered on Armed Forces Day in February.

### The China Angle

Brezhnev did not publicly address current problems in Sino-Soviet relations during his travels. [

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This show of force amounted to an unspoken warning to Peking of Soviet determination to protect its territory along the border between the two countries. It took place only four days after an authoritative editorial article in Pravda had rejected the PRC's latest demand that the USSR pull back its troops from Mongolia and all along the Sino-Soviet border and reduce its military strength there to levels that existed in the early 1960s.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the USSR has a large economic stake in the efficient development of its natural resources in Siberia and the Soviet Far East. It is equally clear that these resources must have adequate military protection and that the region's proximity to China makes this a matter of special concern. For these reasons alone, the Soviet leadership must have felt compelled to demonstrate its interest in an active way in the special social, economic, and security problems that the population in this region face.

It is more difficult to explain why Brezhnev felt the need to become personally involved. The argument can be made that to convince the people who inhabit these distant regions that they are not being neglected and at the same time impress upon them that the central leadership will be monitoring their performance closely, nothing will be as effective as a visit from number one. While there is some merit to this argument, a visit by other elements of the leadership--particularly those who could bring more expertise to local problems--probably would have been equally beneficial.

Brezhnev has done almost no domestic travelling in the past three years, and never has he made a trip of equal scope and duration. The closest analogy was his 1972 trip by air to the Siberian grain fields, which later was billed as a successful effort to rally maximum efforts to bring in the harvest. Even measured by the standards of the peripatetic Khrushchev, Brezhnev's cross-country junket stands up as an unusual tour de force.

It seems likely, therefore, that the overriding motive behind Brezhnev's decision to go on the longest train ride of his life was to enhance his own political stature. After a period of semi-detachment from normal leadership activities, he became--as if to quiet rumors about his reduced capacities--superinvolved. Perhaps to convince those who might still have harbored lingering doubts about his endurance, Brezhnev showed up at the opening session of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet the morning after he returned from the Far East.

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Brezhnev's trip to the other side of the USSR offers not only an immediate payoff in his popular image, but also an opportunity for long-term political dividends. He is likely to expand the Siberian theme in future pronouncements--perhaps at a Central Committee plenum that might occur later this spring--and treat it as a major element in his leadership role. He is now in a position to take credit for the economic growth that is bound to occur in Siberia and the Far East and for the contributions these regions make to the country's economy.

If Brezhnev did feel vulnerable before the trip, then the military features of the journey, and particularly Ustinov's presence, offered considerable comfort. Brezhnev knows that a display of military support of this kind serves his personal political advantage. He also is aware of the heavy anti-Chinese sentiment that exists in the upper echelons of the party and the government, as well as of the popular approval that his travels along the disputed border must have evoked back home. Finally, Brezhnev undoubtedly relished returning to Vladivostok--the site of his last major disarmament achievement--not only to remind Soviet audiences of his past accomplishments but to restate Soviet demands on SALT prior to the Vance-Gromyko meeting later in the month.

In the end, the trip proved that Brezhnev still can be as active as any Soviet leader needs to be. There was no hint, however, that he is considering major decisions or trying out new ideas to solve the particularly difficult economic problems that are on the horizon. In retrospect the trip appears to be a substitute for new policies because effective and politically acceptable answers are not at hand.

Under these circumstances, Brezhnev's leadership abilities may continue to be questioned, but in the absence of new ideas from other elements of the leadership, his position is not likely to be seriously challenged as long as he is able to maintain a reasonably vigorous schedule.

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