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Soviet Union

8 August 1969

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: State of Sino-Soviet Relations

1. With the Ussuri River episodes of March 1969, the already tense and hostile relationship between the USSR and China entered a critical phase. The dozen or so border clashes have involved mainly uniformed forces, rather than civilians, and have produced several hundred fatalities. During March, the levels of propaganda rose to unprecedented heights--to 30 percent of all broadcasts for the Soviets and 77 percent for the Chinese--and the tone became notably harsher. The Soviets in particular began stressing highly emotional themes--the weeping wives and mothers of dead Russian boys, the patriotic letters stained with blood, and the like. Since March, the level of anti-Chinese propaganda has fluctuated at generally lower levels, but ominous new themes have appeared. Soviet commentators, who formerly sought to convey a Soviet attitude of calm and restraint in dealing with foolish Red Guard antics, now stress that Maoism, "a criminal racist theory," represents a "chauvinistic intoxication" that has "reached a point of being a military threat" to the Soviet Union. In his June speech to the International Communist Conference, Brezhnev denounced the Chinese Communists at great length and alleged that Peking was preparing for nuclear war against the USSR. And although playing upon xenophobia and the threat of "foreign devils" is not a new tactic for Peking, the current campaign in China, emphasizing that the Chinese must not show "the slightest timidity before a wild beast," seems to be more extreme than in the past.

2. The developments outlined pose the larger question of how far the foreign policy of each regime will be affected by the continual deterioration of the relationship. The Ninth CCP Congress did not formally demote Washington from its position as enemy number

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one, but it did raise the USSR to a position co-equal with the US. Chinese overtures this year to "ultrarevisionist" Yugoslavia suggest that Peking has become more flexible in pursuing a basically anti-Soviet foreign policy. There is good reason to believe that the Soviet leaders now see China as their most pressing international problem, and are beginning to tailor their policies on other issues accordingly. Brezhnev's proposal for an Asian collective security system, and Foreign Minister Gromyko's address to the USSR Supreme Soviet in July, in which a moderate tone toward the West was juxtaposed with harsh words for the Chinese, both suggest that Moscow is bidding for allies, or at least benevolent neutrals, against China.

3. As of June 1969, the Soviets had some 30 ground force divisions along the Sino-Soviet border and in Mongolia, double the figure of late 1965. About half the divisions were at combat strength, and others were gradually being raised to that status. These divisions were backed up by unusually heavy concentrations of conventional artillery and of tactical surface-to-surface missiles. The increase in Soviet tactical air strength has kept pace with the ground force increase.

4. The Chinese had only about nine ground force divisions in the border areas of Sinkiang, Inner Mongolia, and the Heilungkiang-Kirin regions of Manchuria. They have more than 50 divisions behind them, however, in the Shenyang-Peking-Lanchow Military Regions. In firepower and mobility Chinese divisions are no match for Soviet divisions.

5. It is almost certain that there will be no significant easing of tensions during the next two or three years. Conflicting national interests, competition for leadership of the Communist movement, and genuine fear of each other's intentions will prevent a rapprochement. Even the border problems are not likely to be resolved. While both sides may be willing to reach some temporary accommodation, neither is likely to compromise any fundamental positions.

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6. The situation is now such that for the first time, it is reasonable to ask whether a Sino-Soviet war could break out during the next two or three years.

7. The fact that such a question can be seriously posed is a measure of the seriousness of the Sino-Soviet conflict. But it is easier to ask the question than to give a firm answer. The potential for a war exists; the Soviets, at least, have reasons for initiating military action. But a decision to attack is a political act and we have no firm evidence about the intentions of Chinese and Soviet leaders.

8. We believe that an unprovoked, major attack by China into Soviet territory is highly unlikely. This judgment is based primarily on the fact of China's disadvantage in military power.

9. By contrast, we see reasons why the Soviets might now, or in the near future, consider major offensive actions against the Chinese. The Soviet military planner, looking beyond minor border clashes, must feel that the real danger is yet to come. Probably during the tenure of Mao, and almost certainly during that of his likely successor, Lin Piao, the Chinese will deploy an MRBM force. Even a small number of Chinese missiles would alter the strategic situation, and as the force grew, the Chinese would be under fewer inhibitions in using their ground forces.

10. Recent developments have caused us to examine the question of whether Moscow might be preparing to take action against China in the near future. Lately, there has been unusual military activity on the Soviet side of the Chinese border, including special military exercises in which China was apparently the simulated enemy. Of particular note are indications that forces involved in the exercise came from parts of the Western USSR normally considered the prime reinforcement base against NATO. Also, the Transsiberian Railroad has been carrying a heavy volume of military traffic, apparently to the point of disrupting civilian traffic. This

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military activity seems somewhat disproportionate to the scale of fighting that has actually occurred. Another development is the virtual cessation of Soviet military air activity in the USSR and Eastern Europe which began on the week-end of 2-3 August and continues to the present. There has never been a stand down of this extent for this duration in the USSR. Such a standdown is a classic indicator of preparations to initiate hostilities, although it is not a conclusive one. Other Soviet military components, such as the Strategic Rocket Forces, the ground forces, and non-air naval forces are generally maintaining routine activity. Meanwhile the Chinese, after remaining passive in the face of the earlier Soviet buildup, have begun to make some improvements in their air defenses which suggest that they are taking a more serious view of the situation.

11. There are also political indicators that suggest that the Soviets may be preparing for a showdown with China. The Kremlin is clearly trying to cool down disputes with the West; one purpose is almost certainly to leave its hands free in the East. Soviet propaganda repeats the themes that Mao is a "warlord," a "chauvinist," a "militarist," that he thinks that war is the only solution to his problems, that like all warmongers, he falsely accuses the Kremlin of planning an attack on him in order to excuse his own evil plans. Finally, recent articles and broadcasts deplore the oppression of Uigurs, Kazakhs, and Mongolians in China, and suggest that rebellion by these peoples would be justified.

12. On the other hand, there is a formidable case against Soviet military action. From a military point of view, this rests mainly on the uncertainty of the outcome. The Soviet leaders cannot count on carrying out a strike against the Chinese cleanly and quickly. They must surely realize that they would be starting a process which they could not be sure of controlling, and whose course would be determined as much by the Chinese as by themselves.

13. Moreover certain political factors militate against a Soviet attack on China. The nature of collective leadership is such that the men in the Kremlin might find it easier to continue a policy of improving military and political defenses against the Chinese heresy than to reach a decision to attack. A Sino-Soviet war would certainly complicate relations with Hanoi; it might lead to a loss of Russian influence in the area. Both Communist and non-Communist states in Europe might take advantage

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of Soviet involvement in Asia, particularly if the war were protracted. A war would make reconciliation with China impossible for many years, and it is by no means certain that the Soviets have given up all hope of some improvement in their relations with China after the period of Mao and Lin. Brezhnev's article in the August issue of Problems of Peace and Socialism reaffirmed Soviet friendship for the Chinese people and suggested that he expected a long period of tension rather than an early outbreak of hostilities. The same note has been struck in other recent statements.

14. There are too many uncertainties and too little direct evidence to justify an estimate on the likelihood of a Sino-Soviet war during the next two to three years. What we can say with confidence is that the Soviets have set in motion an extensive series of measures--military, political, diplomatic--to ready themselves for the contingency. Their preparations have already reached a stage which would permit them a variety of military options, defensive or offensive. Beyond this, it is clear that tension between the two countries has become acute. At the very least, polemics will remain strident, and the dispute in its present form will probably intensify and grow. Armed clashes will occur periodically. The scale of fighting may occasionally be greater than heretofore, and might even involve punitive cross-border raids by Soviet ground and tactical air forces. Under such circumstances, escalation to major war is an ever present possibility.