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CIA/GC/77-10136-M

Status and Implications of the BAM Railroad

I. The Soviet Union is constructing a 3,150-kilometer-long railroad in Eastern Siberia through rugged terrain that will produce major economic and strategic benefits.

A. The new line, which will complete the Baikal-Amur Mainline or BAM, will open up valuable Siberian mineral and timber resources in the mid-1980s and provide a back-up for the vulnerable Trans-Siberian, which lies close to the Sino-Soviet border (See Graphic 1). The line will also give the Soviets added logistical capability to supply military units in the Pacific area.

II. The economic implications of the rail line are far-reaching. Access to valuable new mineral resources will be gained or at least improved.

A. These include copper-ore deposits estimated at 1.2 billion tons in the Udokan Mountains; high caloric coking coal south of Yakutsk, and iron ore at Aldan; natural gas in the Vilyuy basin, and oil in the upper Lena region; and large deposits of asbestos, phosphate, mica, gold, tin, and vast timber resources.

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B. The BAM will open an economic development zone more than 300 kilometers wide and will foster construction of new north-south transportation routes that will provide access to undeveloped areas beyond the zone. Development within that zone may ultimately rival the leading industrial complexes in the USSR.

1. A new steel complex is envisioned, as well as energy-intensive industries for chemicals, aluminum, and magnesium.
2. Increased regional demand for manufactured products will also encourage development of machine building and diverse light industries.
2. Several nations, including Japan and the US, have been invited to participate in joint development efforts. Only Japan has indicated an interest by investing in coal and timber resources.

III. Construction of the BAM was started in 1939, discontinued during World War II, and resumed after the war using Japanese POWs.

A. The project was again halted in the late 1950s with the death of Stalin and a shift in national economic priorities. By that time, 1,166 kilometers had been completed at the eastern and western ends.

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1954 to 1945? or 1945?

- B. In 1974 the Soviet regime declared the BAM one of the two major projects of the 10th Five-Year Plan (1976-1980) with a target date of 1983. (The other was the redevelopment of agricultural lands in western USSR.)
- C. Environmental conditions along the BAM route pose serious hindrances to the construction effort. Rugged mountains call for extensive tunneling and bridging from Lake Baikal eastward 1,150 kilometers, and earthquakes and avalanches are common in the mountains. The route crosses permafrost, which requires special construction techniques. Waterlogged lowlands in summer and low temperatures in winter pose additional problems.
- IV. Work is now simultaneously under way in three sectors:
- A. In the 330-kilometer-long western sector, some 90 of the 134 kilometers of track laid are operable. A railroad bridge spans the previously unbridged Lena River, and five new workers' settlements are complete.
- B. In the central sector (2,360 kilometers), the new town of Tynda has been built with a large supply base and an administrative headquarters

for the BAM (Graphic 2). Three railroad bridges and about 65 kilometers of track have also been completed but are not yet operable.

- C. In the eastern sector, about 200 of the 460 kilometers of track have been laid, and a railroad bridge is under construction some 18 kilometers west of Urgal.
- D. Various construction activities are evident elsewhere along the route such as clearing forests, building access roads, establishing work camps, and constructing culverts and short segments of railroad bed. There are, however, extensive stretches of the planned route, primarily in the most difficult terrain, where no construction-related activity is evident.
- V. In terms of labor and capital expenditures, the BAM construction project has no modern counterpart outside China. More than half a million workers and dependents are reportedly involved with the project. Published Soviet estimates place the overall construction cost at more than \$15 billion--about twice that of the Alaska pipeline.

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VI. In sum, Mr. President, the increased need for Siberian resources and the sensitive and unpredictable state of Sino-Soviet relations make it seem most likely that this time the Soviets will complete the entire line. The extreme difficulty of the environment and the Soviets' previous performance in railroad construction projects, however, lead us to believe that their target date of 1983 is optimistic. A more likely completion date would be 1985 or later.

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Baikal-Amur Mainline Railroad (BAM)

Graphic 1



