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29 June 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director of Central Intelligence
SUBJECT : MILITARY THOUGHT (USSR): Airborne Landings
in Operations of a Non-Nuclear Period

1. The enclosed Intelligence Information Special Report is part of a series now in preparation based on the SECRET USSR Ministry of Defense publication Collection of Articles of the Journal "Military Thought." This article discusses the overall complexities of airborne landing operations which would be conducted on NATO territory during a non-nuclear phase of a war. Special emphasis is placed on the hostile environment created by NATO missile and fighter aircraft defenses. As in previous articles, readiness for transition to nuclear warfare during the non-nuclear war phase is an essential requirement for all units. This article appeared in Issue No. 3 (85) for 1968.

2. Because the source of this report is extremely sensitive, this document should be handled on a strict need-to-know basis within recipient agencies.

for W. E. Colby
Deputy Director for Operations

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Intelligence Information Special Report

COUNTRY USSR

DATE OF Late 1968
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DATE 29 June 1973

SUBJECT

MILITARY THOUGHT (USSR) : Airborne Landings in Operations
of a Non-Nuclear Period

SOURCE Documentary

Summary

The following report is a translation from Russian of an article which appeared in Issue No. 3 (85) for 1968 of the SECRET USSR Ministry of Defense publication Collection of Articles of the Journal "Military Thought." The author of this article is Colonel Ye. Grebish. The author discusses the complexities of airborne landings conducted during offensive operations by the ground troops against NATO. He takes into account the deployment and strike capabilities of NATO air defense weapons and concludes that landing operations could best be conducted up to a depth of 150 kilometers within the NATO Central Air Defense Zone after enemy air defenses have been neutralized by fighter-bombers and bombers of the air army of the front concerned in the operation, in conjunction with long-range aviation bombers. Aircraft reserved for a nuclear strike mission would not be utilized. He also discusses the selection of appropriate drop zones and concurs that airborne troops and military-transport aviation must remain under the command and control of the Supreme High Command rather than be transferred to the front.

End of Summary

Comment:

There is no information in available reference materials which can be firmly associated with the author. Military Thought has been published by the USSR Ministry of Defense in three versions in the past--TOP SECRET, SECRET, and RESTRICTED. There is no information as to whether or not the TOP SECRET version continues to be published. The SECRET version is published three times annually and is distributed down to the level of division commander.

T-O-P S E C R E T

Airborne Landings in Operations of a Non-Nuclear Period

by Colonel Ye. Grebish

Among the problems of a non-nuclear period of combat actions, a prominent place is occupied by the problem of the use of airborne landings of various types and, particularly, by the solution of such questions as the possibilities for using each type of landing, the extent and nature of the primary missions, the methods of carrying out these missions, and the factors involved in providing comprehensive support for them.

As is known, the most important condition in the use of airborne landings of all types is that they reach the designated landing areas with minimal losses. This is achieved by decisive neutralization of enemy air defense means in the flight zone of military-transport aircraft and on its flanks, and of enemy units and large units in and near these areas. Using conventional means of destruction, a mission of this complexity can be fulfilled only within certain limits, which depend above all on the actual capabilities of these means.

Along with the enemy installations which must be neutralized before and during an airborne landing, the most stable installations with regard to numbers and deployment sites are the means of the territorial air defense system in the theater of military operations. This is explained by the fact that the air defense system in a theater of military operations is created in peacetime and can be thoroughly evaluated in advance. The means in the interior of the Central Air Defense Zone of the combined armed forces of NATO in Europe may be distributed in the following way. [See table on page 5.]

Taking into account the various combat characteristics of antiaircraft guided missiles and fighter aircraft with regard to range and maneuverability, we shall make separate analyses of their distribution and the strike capabilities of different means.

From the table it is evident that the build-up of surface-to-air missiles to a depth of 150 kilometers is relatively uniform, with forty-four percent of the total missiles within these limits. Another twenty-six percent is distributed over the next fifty kilometers, i.e., the amount jumps up, substantially increasing the demands on our means for their neutralization.

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Distance of resources from East German border, in kilometers	Quantity of resources, in percentages	
	Antiaircraft guided missile battalions	Fighter aircraft squadrons
Up to 50	8%	0
From 50 to 100	18%	0
From 100 to 150	18%	10%
From 150 to 200	26%	0
Over 200	30%	90%
Total	100%	100%

Thus, in our example, access is best to that part of the Central Zone bounded by a depth of 150 kilometers, in which fewer than half of all surface-to-air missiles are deployed (in absolute terms, up to twelve battalions). In addition, these weapons are distributed along the entire front of the zone, with considerably fewer of them lying within the flight zone of military-transport aircraft, a zone 120 to 150 kilometers wide. We must, it is true, reckon with the fact that surface-to-air missile fire in the Central Air Defense Zone will intensify as a result of actions by enemy field antiaircraft weapons located in this flight zone. However, within the limits being examined, the neutralization of air defense means, even taking field weapons into account, may be considered feasible. In order to accomplish this, two or three air divisions composed of fighter-bombers and bombers may be drawn from the air army of the front in whose zone the airborne landing is being carried out. If we consider that a certain portion of these divisions will be in a constant state of readiness for mounting an initial nuclear strike, then six to thirteen squadrons of fighter-bombers and bombers must be included in their composition. The use of these aircraft will make it possible to neutralize an equal number of battalions of antiaircraft guided missiles and antiaircraft artillery, or two to three times as many separate batteries and radiotechnical posts (control points).

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In addition to front aviation, long-range aviation may also be drawn upon for neutralizing the enemy air defense system, particularly his antiaircraft weapons in a selected area. Part of its missions will be carried out not only in support of airborne landings but also in support of its own actions. The neutralization of enemy antiaircraft weapons located in the tactical zone must be carried out by forces of the rocket troops and artillery of the front.

The relatively large radius of operations of enemy fighter-interceptors, and their maneuver capabilities, make it impossible to set a definite zone within which aircraft must be destroyed at their bases or in the air. In this case, the methodology used in analyzing the distribution and neutralization of antiaircraft weapons is no longer suitable. As can be seen from the attached table, only ten percent of the air defense fighter squadrons are based to a depth of 200 kilometers. However, the system of detection and guidance and the combat capabilities of fighter aircraft make it possible to use squadrons in the forward part of the zone even if they are based at a considerably greater depth. Therefore, the mission of combat with fighter aircraft of the enemy air defense will obviously be carried out as part of the larger strategic mission of winning air supremacy.

The complexity of overcoming the enemy air defense system demands the application of various means and methods to reduce possible losses among military-transport aircraft and landing troops. Thus, in addition to neutralizing numerous air defense installations, it is very important to make the correct choice of flight zones for military-transport aircraft, and of flight altitudes over certain sectors of the route, and to take a whole complex of measures for combat with enemy radioelectronic means.

In choosing the flight zones for military-transport aircraft, we must choose the axes with the weakest air defense system, taking into account the weapons of enemy ground troops. This requirement must be given preference even if it causes a lengthening of the route somewhat.

The flight altitude of military-transport aircraft must be minimal by the time they enter the zone of enemy radar detection. This not only increases the security of the landing but substantially lowers the chances of aircraft being hit by enemy active

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air defense weapons. True, operating at extremely low altitudes increases the possibility of losses from small arms fire, but the effectiveness of such fire can be sharply reduced if flights to the drop zone and back are made after dark. Night is also the most favorable time for the airborne landing itself. Darkness makes it more difficult for enemy troops to operate in the drop zone, and the surprise of a night strike furthers the creation of panic in enemy ranks.

In the overall complex of measures taken by the Supreme High Command and by the branches of the armed forces for combat with enemy radioelectronic means, the means of military-transport aviation can play an important role. Group and individual means of jamming, when used purposefully (to protect isolated aircraft, combat formations of large units, and the overall operational structure of military-transport aviation), can reduce the level of losses an average of fifteen to twenty percent.

The task of overcoming an air defense system with the fewest possible losses of landing troops and military-transport aircraft seems to us to be so important that in individual instances the conditions for its fulfilment may strongly influence the nature and content of the missions of airborne landings. In our view, this is the essential feature in the use of airborne landings in a non-nuclear period. We may even, when considering capabilities for overcoming enemy air defenses, single out the most urgent tasks which can best be assigned to airborne landings in each specific case.

Thus, in our example it is considered advisable to use airborne landings to a depth of up to 150 kilometers, depending on how the enemy air defense system is structured and on capabilities for neutralizing it. The extent to which airborne landings can be used will vary depending on conditions in the theater of military operations, along the individual axes, and in various areas; on how the situation develops; and on the composition of the forces and weapons participating in the operation. The important thing here is not to find some sort of specific and, at the same time, generally applicable figures in all instances, but a graphic display of the available possibilities for overcoming air defenses in non-nuclear actions.

A very important condition for the successful use of airborne landings is the preparation or choice of the drop area. Drop

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areas will obviously be areas in which enemy troops have been effectively neutralized and are not in any condition to disrupt the landing or have any serious effect on the landing troops at the very beginning of their actions. Great difficulties are involved in achieving this condition, as well as in overcoming enemy air defenses. On the one hand, difficulties are caused by a lack of capabilities for striking enemy troops, and, on the other hand, by the relatively high enemy troop density at this comparatively slight depth, into which airborne forces are to be dropped with the smallest possible losses from air defense weapons. If it is difficult to come to grips with the first factor, i.e. if it is not possible to add to existing strike weapons, the second can at least be appreciably reduced. This is achieved by several methods.

One of these is to find areas which are less densely occupied by the enemy but at the same time satisfy requirements for the fulfilment of specified combat missions by the landing forces, since reaching a given area does not constitute an end in itself. The nature of the operational makeup of enemy troops and combat structures makes it possible to find many such areas if it is a question of tactical landings. They will be areas in which rear services organs are accommodated in support of the actions of army corps of the first echelon, and areas in which launch sites for "Pershing" missiles are located, and others. In these places troop density is not great, and the troops themselves, being poorly suited for ground combat, do not have high combat capabilities. There are also many such areas in the combat structures of enemy large units and units. On this scale, of course, areas which are weakly held by the enemy will have considerably smaller dimensions than they would have in the operational depth, but they will be able to satisfy the requirements of tactical airborne landings of limited size.

The second method consists of choosing the most favorable time for using airborne landings. This is linked with creating a situation for the enemy wherein he is prevented from calling on any significant forces for combat with the airborne landing. Such a situation may apparently be expected when our ground troops commit second echelons and reserves to combat, at which time the enemy will try to parry the strike by drawing on inactive or less committed troops which he could otherwise use against landing forces.

The choice of timing for airborne landings is also affected by our evaluation of the condition of the enemy air defense system,

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which will weaken progressively with the successful development of an offensive operation. However, postponing a drop until the third or fourth day of an operation for this reason, as some authors suggest, is not entirely justified.* Of course, the combat effectiveness of the enemy air defense system may be significantly lower by this time, and the support needed for the drop aircraft may require fewer forces than on the first or second day of the operation. This concept also gives up the idea of using airborne landings as a powerful means of pressure in depth against the enemy from the very beginning of combat operations in which only conventional means of destruction are used, operations which are considered to be of relatively short duration. This does not mean, of course, that we should rule out instances in which actual developments make it impossible to use airborne landings before the third or fourth day of an operation. Thus, only a combination of methods, using many different ones according to specific circumstances, can have a positive effect on the success of airborne landings and their actions in the enemy rear.

In combat actions using only conventional means of destruction, there is also a considerable limitation on capabilities for supporting an airborne landing during combat operations in the enemy rear.

As is known, only aircraft can, with conventional means of destruction, provide effective support for landings for conducting combat in the enemy rear at distances exceeding the range of the artillery of ground troops. However, in a non-nuclear period, the combat resources of aircraft (front and long-range) are limited, since a certain portion of them must be in constant readiness for making an initial nuclear strike. As a result, a number of missions which aircraft could fulfil to support actions by airborne landings are either impossible in general or can be allotted only limited forces.

This makes it necessary to broaden the fire capabilities of airborne landings themselves. This can be achieved by increasing the quantity and power of organic weapons in the airborne large units and units and increasing the size of the combat reserves with which they are dropped (land) in the enemy rear. The latter requirement is also very important because the difficulties

*Information Collection of the Airborne Troops No. 41, Military Publishing House, 1967, page 6.

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encountered by military transport aircraft in overcoming enemy air defenses to drop supplies to landing forces limit the capability for making supply drops during combat actions. But the duration of combat actions, as is known, may reach three to five days when the landings are relatively shallow in depth, and longer in individual instances. Therefore, in drop operations in which maximum efforts are made to protect the military-transport aircraft making a supply drop, airborne landing forces must be provided initially with a quantity of supplies, particularly munitions, in excess of what is presently considered adequate.

Finally, one of the conditions for the successful use of airborne landings is the correct appreciation of the features of the actions of ground forces advancing from the front. In operations using nuclear weapons, the missions of airborne landing forces will, as is known, be coordinated above all with the overall plan for mounting nuclear strikes, particularly strikes of strategic designation, and the fulfilment of these missions will depend to a decisive degree on the results of these strikes. The great distance of airborne landings, especially those of operational-strategic designation, from the troops advancing from the front hinders them in carrying out missions deep in the rear and operating there independently for eight to ten days or more. The Supreme High Command always has the capability to mount nuclear strikes against whatever enemy force is threatening the landing to the greatest degree, and this is enormously important for the attainment of success by the landing.

The situation is somewhat different under non-nuclear conditions, when ground forces carry the main responsibility for routing the enemy. The use of airborne landings will then depend to a great extent on the capabilities of troops operating from the front to carry out their combat missions in the allotted time. Therefore, if we assume that the non-nuclear period includes the initial army operations, the depth of the missions carried out by troops may be 200 to 250 kilometers and their rate of advance up to 40 or 50 kilometers per day. Under these conditions, the use of airborne landings will have an operational character, i.e., as a rule they will be in support of the front at a depth of up to 150 to 200 kilometers from the line of armed contact of the two sides, or even farther in individual cases. The duration of their combat actions must be three to five days under these conditions, after which they may be expected to join up with the troops of the front. The figures cited concerning the depth of landings correspond to the

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capabilities of support means, as discussed above, and they are also confirmed to a certain extent by the experience of the "Dnepr" training exercise.

It goes without saying that the considerations which we have reviewed cannot be considered as a complete rejection of the use of airborne landings on an operational-strategic scale. The conditions of a non-nuclear period can give rise to a number of problems whose resolution will have operational-strategic significance even when there are limited capabilities for striking the enemy at great depth. An important factor in determining the essence of these problems and methods for solving them is the military-political situation developing in the theater of military operations as a whole and in its separate areas before the war and at the very beginning of military actions.

Thus, airborne landings will find fairly wide application even in a non-nuclear period of military actions. This is especially true of operational airborne landings used in support of a front offensive operation.

What are the basic principles of organizing the use of operational airborne landings? Since airborne landings of operational designation will be used mainly in support of front offensive operations, it would seem that the staffs of the fronts should be made responsible for all of the organizational work connected with the preparation and dropping of these landings and that the necessary airborne troops and military-transport aircraft should be included in the composition of the troops of the fronts. However, various factors make it impossible to take this course, at least with regard to airborne landings in offensive operations in the main theaters of military operations. The Supreme High Command should retain control of these landings right up to the organization of the drop, as well as of all support for the landings.

The reason for this is that in preparing an operation in a given theater of military operations our point of departure must be the two possible variants of how military actions may begin--nuclear and non-nuclear. If war begins with a nuclear period, centralized use of airborne troops is projected for this period. The missions of airborne landings will be mainly operational-strategic in content, and the influence of fronts on their

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operations will become most substantial only at the end of the airborne operation. The situation is different in a non-nuclear period when airborne actions are directly in support of fronts and are very closely connected with them from the moment of landing. However, it is very difficult to guess in advance how an operation will begin in a theater of military operations, since war is a two-sided process and the nature of the actions of our Armed Forces depends to a considerable degree on the actions of the enemy. It is also difficult to establish the moment at which the two sides will switch to the use of nuclear weapons in operations with conventional means of destruction.

Airborne troops and military-transport aviation, i.e., the main operating forces of landing operations, are means of the Supreme High Command, as is known. It would be too complicated and lengthy a process to transfer them to fronts, along with the whole complex of functions for directing the use of operational landings, in case military actions have a non-nuclear beginning. This variant is therefore not widely accepted. In addition, considering how greatly the use of operational airborne landings depends on the developing situation in the theater of military operations, it is easier for the question of their most effective use to be resolved by the senior command echelon, which sees the situation in its full breadth, than by the command of the front, which operates in a limited zone.

Finally, the last, but by no means the least important, factor is that the complete transfer of control of the use of operational airborne landings to fronts would require the inclusion in their composition of the necessary forces of airborne troops, particularly military-transport aircraft, which is scarcely possible at present, for a whole series of reasons.

Thus, we have come to the conclusion that even in military actions using only conventional means of destruction, the use of airborne assault landings will be centralized under the control of the Supreme High Command, despite the fact that their missions will most often be operational in nature. This by no means excludes, but rather assumes, the transfer of control of landing operations to the commanders of fronts directly upon completion of the drops. In this case, the means of the Supreme High Command which are drawn off to support combat actions of airborne landings in the enemy rear may carry out their missions upon request of fronts or as

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part of the overall target designation of means. This affects, above all, long-range aviation carrying out strikes and conducting reconnaissance in support of landings; but it also affects transport aviation dropping necessary combat supplies to landing forces.

When airborne landing forces are carrying out missions along coastal axes, near straits, and on islands, or as part of a combined landing forces, the fleet commander may be made responsible for matters of directing them after the drop and for implementing the coordination of forces.

In operations conducted in minor theaters of military operations, it is advisable to apply a different principle for organizing and directing airborne landings. The fronts in this case will be operating on strategic axes which are independent, isolated, and appreciably removed from other theaters of military operations. For this reason, separate large units (units) of airborne troops and military-transport aviation may be incorporated beforehand into the composition of the troops of the fronts. The responsibility for the preparation and use of airborne landings will be placed entirely on the staff of the front. In case of need, the Supreme High Command will of course assist the fronts with additional forces and means and will organize the coordination of landings with formations and large units of branches of the armed forces being used in the theater in accord with the plans of the Supreme High Command.

These, in our view, are the features characterizing the use of airborne landings in offensive operations of ground troops when armed conflict is conducted with only conventional means of destruction.

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