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10 December 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Ambassador

SUBJECT : Brezhnev's Political Position in the Wake  
of the Middle East War; Excerpts from  
5 December European Brief in Reference  
to Brezhnev

The following was given to H.I.M. on 1 December:

Brezhnev's Political Position in the Wake of the Middle East  
War

Brezhnev seems to have weathered the Middle East Crisis well. In fact, public signs suggest that his political position has reached a new peak.

The weeks since the outbreak of hostilities in the Middle East have posed a series of difficult choices for Brezhnev and his colleagues, requiring them to weigh Soviet equities in the Middle East against detente with the U.S. The results of the Soviet balancing act are of course not yet all in, but the first post-war reading of Brezhnev's internal political standing has been auspicious.

During the summer and early fall, detente trade initiatives had edged toward some conflict with internal security priorities on emigration, dissidence, and freer movement was uneven, and treatment of these issues in the Soviet media reflected differing priorities in various quarters of the Party and Government apparatus. Brezhnev himself had been notably defensive about the achievements of his detente policies in his last speech before the Middle East War--in Tashkent on 24 September.

Moscow sought to exploit the Middle East Crisis to gain credit in the Socialist and Developing World. This approach also had the effect of foreclosing opportunities for sniping by those Soviets who are skeptical of the pace and deepening of detente and concerned over its impact on other Soviet Foreign Policy objectives. In contrast to the U.S. and European areas, where Brezhnev is strongly identified with Soviet initiatives, he had not been out in front of his leadership colleagues on Middle East policy and was not therefore particularly vulnerable.

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-2-

Sensitive reports suggest that a high degree of collectivity was maintained within the leadership during the Middle East Crisis. Brezhnev was careful to coordinate all Soviet moves with key senior members of the leadership, primarily Premier Kosygin, President Podgorny, Defense Minister Grechko, and Foreign Minister Gromyko. Other members of the leadership were apparently kept well informed of developments. The Politburo met frequently, often late into the night.

There were, however, hints of some friction within the leadership as the crisis mounted; concern over Brezhnev's strong personal hand in managing the crisis and renewed reservations about detente. According to a highly sensitive report, the Soviet bid to the U.S. on 19 October for immediate talks in Moscow was Brezhnev's idea. Brezhnev reportedly expressed delight at the President's quick acceptance, indicating that some in the Politburo, including specifically Podgorny, had disapproved of the initiative or some aspects of it.

There had also evidently been some criticism of Brezhnev's decision to contact personally President Nixon, rather than going through regular Soviet Government channels. Brezhnev was seemingly worried lest he appear to be acting beyond the limits of his role as Party Chief, but dismissed these (unidentified) critics with a curt, "The devil with them". Concern that Brezhnev might exceed his mandate seemed to be feared by Kosygin. Just before Brezhnev's meeting with Kissinger, Kosygin apparently found it necessary to remind the Party boss to adhere to "our resolution" in the talks.

As the crisis period eased, Brezhnev's grasp of power seemed firmer than ever. The October Revolution celebrations on 6-7 November were the occasion for another surge in his personality cult. His unofficial Party Deputy, Kirilenko, paid Brezhnev effusive tribute in the traditional holiday speech, always a highly coordinated leadership product. Brezhnev's leadership was also emphasized in placards carried in the 7 November parade, which closed with a giant blow-up of "Pravda" front pages reporting his trips last spring to the U.S., France, and West Germany.

Brezhnev's political power and patronage are now formidable by any standards. This year's record harvest will work to his political advantage. The semi-annual USSR Supreme Soviet Session announced for 12 December is likely to be preceded by a

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-3-

Party Plenum, and Western news sources have reported that Soviet observers believe agriculture will be the main topic on the Plenum agenda.

Brezhnev's very pre-eminence, however, underlines his ultimate responsibility for any policy setbacks. The Soviet policy balance sheet in the Middle East Crisis is mixed. The Middle East has once again dragged the USSR into a crisis involving direct political and military risk. Arab gratitude for Soviet assistance continues to be a highly dubious proposition, as does the prospect of the USSR increasing its influence in the area.

Below are excerpts from the 5 December 1973 European Brief:

"The role of the pace-setting, frequently ebullient salesman of detente falls to Brezhnev, by virtue of both his pre-eminence and his inclinations. Kosygin's approach is more restrained."

"Brezhnev, speaking at the World Peace Congress in Moscow on 26 October, had spoken more broadly of an 'International Division of Labor,' beginning with the whole European continent (not just Socialist Eastern Europe). Brezhnev had also advocated large-scale mutually advantageous economic ties with the capitalist world in speeches in Alma Ata in August and Tashkent in September. Kosygin's narrower focus may derive in part from his intensive involvement in the frequently contentious details of implementing a degree of Soviet-East European economic integration through CEMA."

"Since the Congress (i.e. 24th Party Congress in 1971), Brezhnev's own formulations of foreign policy goals have evolved into a greater emphasis on detente and arms limitation."

"Kosygin praised Brezhnev's 26 October speech for its comprehensiveness and 'profound conclusions,' however, and acknowledged Brezhnev's personal role, alongside Politburo and Central Committee efforts, in recent Soviet foreign policy successes."

"On the Chinese problem Kosygin also stood squarely with Brezhnev. . . . Kosygin struck similar notes as had Brezhnev in his speech of 26 October as well as in his Tashkent speech on 24 September."