

07 12

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

16 November 1978

MEMORANDUM

Status Report on the Soviet Leadership

We are now in the closing years of the Brezhnev era-- a possibly long drawn-out period marked by uncertainties and generally sterile leadership. Although Brezhnev's declining vigor increasingly prompts questions about how long he can continue in office, there is no indication that he plans to step down or that agreement has been reached on who would succeed him except on an interim basis.

Brezhnev, who will be 72 next month, is clearly not the man he was a few years ago. His health is failing. He is subject to increasingly lengthy periods of illness, tires easily, and is not always on top of the subject at hand. In a sense he is being propped up. His press pictures are touched up, his schedule is carefully controlled, and his aides are increasingly in evidence to lend him support.

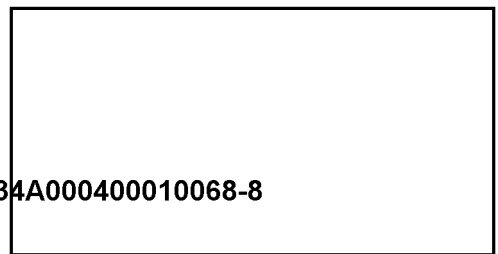
He is, however, being propped up by aides of his own choosing and with the acquiescence of his Politburo colleagues. And on matters of vital interest to Brezhnev--such as US-Soviet relations, in which he has invested considerable political capital--he is still capable of performing adequately and defending his policies.

In some ways Brezhnev's position has never been stronger. What he has lost in vigor has been offset by added prestige. He gained the post of USSR president in 1977, presided over the adoption of a new constitution later that year, and hopes to crown his achievements with a summit meeting and a SALT II agreement. And all the while a Brezhnev personality cult has ballooned.

RP-M-78-10434

25X1

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010068-8

Another facet of Brezhnev's power is his authority; none of his colleagues is inclined to challenge him. In part this is because no viable long-term successor has yet emerged from the next "take-over" generation of leaders. The situation within the leadership in this regard is at a stalemate.

The senior members of the leadership are all in their 70s and two of the most influential, Premier Kosygin and party theoretician Suslov, are several years older than Brezhnev. The seniors have tended to hang in together, seeing their own interests best served by denying ambitious members of the younger generation access to the levers of power.

Andrey Kirilenko, Brezhnev's close associate and long-time deputy in the party Secretariat, is the odds-on favorite to inherit the "Brezhnev machine" if his boss is suddenly incapacitated in the near future. While he has a strong political base and is seemingly in robust health, he is Brezhnev's age and can not hope to serve as more than a transitional leader.

None of the potential contenders for the succession among the younger members of the leadership is sufficiently well positioned to be considered a strong candidate. As one seasoned observer put it, those who have the necessary broad national experience are too old, while the most promising among the younger leaders do not have the requisite experience. Politburo members Shcherbitskiy and Romanov continue to hold posts in the provinces far from the center in Moscow. Party secretary Kulakov, who until his death in July was the most advantageously positioned of all the younger potential successors, was hampered by his lack of experience beyond the narrow field of agriculture--a limitation Brezhnev apparently fostered.

Thus Brezhnev evidently has been successful in neutralizing all potential challenges, but it is clear from the signs of political maneuvering this year that he himself can not--any more than he ever could--completely control the succession process and push forward his own candidate over the objections of his Politburo colleagues.

It may be that Brezhnev is not eager to designate an heir apparent, even if he could, for fear that to do so could hasten his own political demise. He might want to

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010068-8

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010068-8

improve the position of a favorite like his protege Shcherbitskiy, whose transfer to a post in Moscow would give him more national exposure. It is likely, however, that Suslov, Kosygin, and other members of the Politburo, including potential contenders in Brezhnev's own camp, would oppose such a move because it could threaten their political lives.

It may take the death of one or more of the top leaders to break this seeming impasse. The order of their going will be all-important to the shape of the future leadership. If Brezhnev dies in office or becomes incapacitated before many months have passed, Kirilenko is likely to be named to succeed him to serve a relatively short term, one characterized by jockeying among the remaining senior Politburo members for influence over the direction of policy and the outcome of the next succession. How this is handled could determine whether the transfer of power to the next generation of leaders is marked by a bitter, protracted struggle or is relatively smooth. (There is an outside chance, for example, that Brezhnev could outlast other seniors--the highly influential Suslov, in particular--and in such circumstances his opportunities to order the succession would be greatly improved.)

The impact of a possible succession crisis on Soviet-US relations is, of course, difficult to predict. Soviet history suggests that transition periods can be times of foreign policy flexibility and fluidity, but, as we have already implied, Brezhnev's immediate succession could be marked by a considerable degree of continuity.

The current stage of SALT, the major element in Soviet-US relations, is not likely to be significantly affected by a change at the top in Moscow. Recent meetings between Secretary Vance and Foreign Minister Gromyko have narrowed somewhat the areas of disagreement on this issue, and Soviet officials have been voicing cautious optimism over the prospects for a successful conclusion of SALT II and for initiation of the next phase of negotiations.

At the same time, the Kremlin remains sharply opposed to US mediation efforts in the Middle East and continues to pursue its political goals in Africa in conflict with US policy objectives there, insisting at the same time that there should be no political linkage between competition in

- 3 -

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010068-8

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010068-8

Africa and major issues in Soviet-US relations such as SALT. In addition, propaganda hostile to the United States continues at a high level, particularly on issues such as the neutron weapon. Under the best of circumstances, therefore, Soviet foreign policy during a succession transition period probably will display a similar mix of cooperation and hostility. Even a divided group of leaders, fighting among themselves, will no doubt find common cause in continuing to challenge the West in selected strategic areas.

- 4 -

CONFIDENTIAL

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010068-8

25X1

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010068-8

Approved For Release 2006/05/25 : CIA-RDP80T00634A000400010068-8