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16 November 1979

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Projected Soviet Responses to Possible US
Actions in Iran

SUMMARY

The Soviets want to reap the greatest possible benefit from the current anti-US hysteria gripping Iran. They hope to portray the US in the worst possible light and to advance their own interests with Iran's rulers. In view of intense US efforts to free the hostages, they will be careful to maintain a "correct" official posture. But, should the US undertake any active economic or military operations designed either to put pressure on Iran or free the hostages, the Soviets will almost certainly condemn them and seek to exploit them to improve their position with Tehran. In the event the US undertakes any of the military activities discussed in this paper (a naval blockade, an Entebbe-type raid, a quick-strike, division-level intervention), they might go so far as to put their armed forces on alert and increase their surveillance activities in the region. However, they would try to avoid actions which they believe would contain the risk of military confrontation with the US. [redacted]

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bad word
because of
double
meaning.

BACKGROUND

The Soviets have been pleased with recent events in Iran, which have revived their hopes that the Iranian revolution will assume a shape and direction favorable to their interests. Soviet media commentary has welcomed the new revolutionary currents in Tehran and endorsed the outpouring of anti-US sentiment. Moscow hopes the current episode will permanently damage Iranian-US relations and is fanning Iranian suspicions of US intentions to promote that goal. [redacted]

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Soviet responses to US actions will in part be conditioned by Moscow's estimate of their effect on Soviet-American relations. The Soviets know that gains to be derived from the Iranian situation must be weighed against the danger of longterm damage to relations with the US. If they believe fundamental US national interests are at stake, they are likely to tread cautiously in seeking advantages. Since the US demarche of 8 November, for example, the Soviets have moderated their more strident official media commentary. Moscow has endorsed the principle of diplomatic inviolability, although it is taking a backseat in efforts to secure the release of hostages, lest an active stance antagonize Tehran.

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SOVIET REACTIONS TO POSSIBLE US COURSES OF ACTION

- I. Continuation of current US efforts to exert diplomatic pressure on Iran and to take selective economic action in response to Iranian moves.
 - A. The Soviets will continue to avoid diplomatic actions that appear to pressure Tehran. However, in forums such as the UN, where their actions are conspicuous, they will not oppose widely-backed US efforts. They will not actively disrupt US attempts to mobilize the international community, but they will not endorse or participate in such efforts. This amounts to passive obstruction of US efforts in certain circumstances, such as in Tehran, where Soviet non-participation undermined US efforts to present a unanimous appeal of the diplomatic corps to the Iranian leadership.
 - B. The Soviet official media will maintain the less inflammatory line it has followed since the US demarche of 8 November and will avoid open support for Iranian actions. However, a bias in favor of the Iranian position will continue to be reflected in selective reporting of "factual" material and in reporting designed to stimulate Iranian suspicions of US actions.
 - C. The Soviets will continue to convey support for Iranian actions through their broadcasts in Persian out of Baku over the "National Voice of Iran."

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While this station will continue to argue against measures which might result in harm to the hostages, its inflammatory tone with respect to US intentions and operations inside Iran will aim to encourage and take advantage of the anti-US sentiment in Iran.

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II. A US policy of economic pressure on Iran, specifically imposition of a food embargo.

A. The Soviets would undoubtedly condemn such action on both humanitarian and political grounds, terming it a further effort to destabilize Iran for the benefit of counter-revolutionary forces. Their criticism would be harsh and aimed at generating both Iranian and third-world resentment of US pressure.

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B. If Moscow thought enough third-world backing were available, it might support a diplomatic effort at the UN to condemn the use of food as a tool of international politics.

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C. It is possible that the Soviets would try to take advantage of a US food boycott by making a "humanitarian" gesture toward Iran, such as sending a shipment of grain. Their willingness to make more than a symbolic gesture would probably be limited, however, by their own grain shortages. They might also be unwilling to risk the possible US irritation which might result from a blatant Soviet effort to circumvent such a boycott.

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III. US efforts to mobilize West European and Japanese economic sanctions, including an oil boycott, against Iran.

A. The Soviets would also condemn such actions as "economic imperialism" directed against the third-world and would suggest to the developed countries that the US was trying to disrupt their economies.

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B. They might encourage East European purchases of some Iranian oil in an effort to acquire long-term access to this energy source. They could also offer their services to Iran as a broker for

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indirect sales to the West. But Moscow does not have the interest or the resources to purchase large amounts of oil on their own account. 25X1

C. Moscow would probably suggest to Tehran that the Western action demonstrated that Iran should consider developing longer term economic contacts with the Soviet bloc. 25X1

IV. A US naval blockade of Iran.

A. The Soviets would harshly condemn as imperialist such a US action, labelling it an attempt to bring down the Iranian regime. 25X1

B. They would probably encourage third-world diplomatic activity designed to put pressure on the US, including possible UN condemnation. 25X1

C. They would increase their own naval deployments in the area and probably institute surveillance of US ships participating in such a blockade. However, they would almost certainly try to avoid any sort of confrontation. 25X1

25X1 D. They would be likely to issue vaguely-worded warnings to the effect that they could not remain indifferent to "warlike activities" close to their borders.

E. They would likely pass intelligence information on US actions to their contacts in Iran. 25X1

25X1 F. They would probably put their armed forces on alert status, but they would not directly challenge the US.

V. A US-initiated, Entebbe-type raid into Tehran.

A. The Soviet reaction to such an operation would be similar to that in IV; however, given the very short duration of such an operation, the Soviets would have only a limited time for reaction. 25X1

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- VI. A US quick-strike military intervention involving an airborne division.
- A. Soviet reaction would be similar to that in IV and V. Once again, it is likely that the Soviets would try to avoid any type of direct response which they anticipated could lead to military confrontation with the US.

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In all of the military options discussed above, the questions of Soviet perceptions of US intentions and the duration of the operation are highly relevant. In all cases, it is presumed that the Soviets would be aware that the USSR is in no way a target of the operation and that the US does not intend to maintain a permanent military presence in Iran. Similarly, in all of the options projected, the time-frame for projected US actions is assumed to be quite short. The longer a US military operation were to continue, the more pressure the Soviets would feel to respond effectively to military action in a bordering country and the greater the risk of Soviet miscalculation would become.

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In addition, it is conceivable that the Iranians would request Soviet assistance in the event of a prolonged US military operation, such as a blockade. Should this occur, the Soviets would probably still seek to avoid confrontation with the US. But they might seek to court Iranian favor by sharing intelligence information or by making offers of military hardware or advisory personnel.

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