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# A 1980 Soviet Test: How to Invade Iran

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 14 — The Soviet Union carried out an ambitious exercise of its ability to invade Iran six years ago, according to a newly disclosed "top secret" Pentagon evaluation and interviews with present and former Government officials.

In the exercise, which was conducted on Soviet territory just north of Iran, senior Soviet military officials tested communications systems that would be used and acted out the roles they would play in such an invasion.

The exercise, however, did not involve a significant buildup of Soviet troops on the Iranian border or any large-scale movement of Soviet forces. No actual military intervention was imminent, according to the classified report.

The report provides the first authoritative account of the Soviet exercise, which was the largest of this type involving Iran conducted in recent years and which was carried out at a time of particular turmoil in the region.

## Encouraged New U.S. Force

The exercise also led to a debate inside the Carter Administration over what diplomatic message should be conveyed to Soviet officials. And it encouraged American efforts to develop the Rapid Deployment Force, which is designed to be used for military intervention in the Persian Gulf region.

The Pentagon evaluation also sheds some light on recent statements by former Reagan Administration officials who have been involved in the covert shipment of arms to Iran.

Robert C. McFarlane, the former national security adviser, argued that the Administration was justified in trying to open a channel to so-called Iranian moderates because of Iranian concern over Soviet military activity north of the border. A Soviet invasion of Iran is "more than conceivable if you have examined Soviet exercises conducted in

recent years," Mr. McFarlane said in a speech on Thursday.

The Pentagon evaluation was obtained by The New York Times before the Administration's decision to send arms to Iran became known. Some information was supplied by officials who have become concerned about exaggerated reports of the exercise.

Military officials said they had expected the 1980 exercise to be repeated last year, but this did not happen. Some experts speculated that the Soviet Union had not repeated the exercise so as to avoid hurting its political relations with Iran.

## Another Exercises in 1985

The Soviet Union has conducted other exercises north of Iran. Last year, for example, it staged a field exercise there involving more than 25,000 troops. In that exercise, called "Kavkaz '85," ~~no specific military target was specified~~, military officials said.

While the Soviet Union has taken some steps to improve its forces north of Iran, the Central Intelligence Agency has told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee that "outright Soviet military intervention or an invasion of Iran remains a remote possibility" — remote unless the United States intervened militarily in Iran, or the Central Government in Iran collapsed and "leftist" groups seized control in some regions. The C.I.A. analysis was presented in confidential 1983 testimony that has only recently been declassified.

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The 1980 Soviet exercise simulating the invasion of Iran took place at a time when Americans were being held hostage in Teheran and Soviet troops were newly arrived in Afghanistan. In January 1980, Mr. Carter articulated the Carter doctrine, which stated that the United States would use force to defend its interests in the region.

At the time, the United States strategy for responding to possible Soviet military actions in the region were the focus of debate in the Government.

The State Department opposed the idea of using American force based on intelligence readings that were somewhat ambiguous, fearing that it could trigger a Soviet invasion.

## Intelligence Called Ambiguous

But some civilians in the Defense Department stressed the need to act quickly on the basis of intelligence reports because they felt it was important to assemble a force in southern Iran before the Russians could get there.

"The debate had been under way for several months, then all of a sudden it began to look as if something might really be happening," said a former official, who added that the intelligence was ambiguous.

What happened, officials say, is that in August 1980 American intelligence intercepted Soviet communications about an "invasion" of Iran.

The Soviet exercise is described in a "top secret" section of a report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Congress, which was completed later that year.

"In August 1980, an unusually long and complex General Staff-controlled command-post exercise featuring a mock national Soviet invasion of Iran was held in the transborder area," the reports says. "A complex, theater-level command, control and communications system was developed, evaluated and updated; and high-level commanders and staffs rehearsed roles in an invasion scenario."

#### How Exercise Was Conducted

In a command-post exercise, commanders practice the execution of battle plans and test communications systems, but large numbers of troops are not moved on the field.

Many command centers for military units were activated, including those of Soviet units that are normally stationed far from the border with Iran.

Because American intelligence agencies learned of the exercise by monitoring Soviet communications, the United States was initially unsure whether the communications they were monitoring were only part of an exercise or of an actual invasion.

"It threw a scare through us," a former military officer said.

An increased intelligence watch was ordered, and consideration was given in the Joint Chiefs of Staff to strengthening the American military presence in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.

#### No Responses Were Ordered

But the nature of the exercise became clear before any military responses were ordered, former officials say.

"Nevertheless, Soviet forces opposite Iran have not reached an advanced readiness posture, and there is no indication that an invasion is imminent," according to the Pentagon report, which was prepared soon after the exercise. "No large-scale mobilization, repositioning of forces, logistics build-up, or major (division or higher) field training exercises have been observed."

"Substantial additional preparation — 30 days or more — would be required to initiate and sustain a full-scale invasion," the report said. It added that the United States "could expect to detect preparations necessary for a full-scale invasion of Iran within one or two weeks after commencement."

As reconstructed by American intelligence agencies, the scenario used in the exercise involved a full-scale invasion of Iran in which Soviet forces moved south to the Persian Gulf in a three-pronged attack.

One prong moved into northern Iran. Another group of Soviet forces drove south toward the Strait of Hormuz, through which oil tankers carry Persian Gulf oil. Other Soviet forces

positioned themselves at the top of the Gulf for a possible thrust toward Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The conclusions of the Pentagon report raise questions about some published accounts. The Armed Forces Journal, in a report recounted by The New York Times and other news organizations, asserted in a September article that the Soviet Union undertook a "sudden buildup" of its forces north of Iran in August 1980 and placed those troops on a "war footing."

Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser for President Carter, wrote in his memoirs that the United States "had mounting intelligence" in late August 1980 "that the Soviets were deploying forces on the Iranian frontier in a mode suited for intervention in Iran." Mr. Brzezinski declined to discuss the exercise, citing concerns over secret information. And his book, which recounted his impression of the intelligence reports at the moment, does not say what subsequent conclusions were reached.

Some former military officials said they believe the exercise was intended to improve Soviet military abilities because Moscow was increasingly concerned about instability on its borders in the region.

#### Political Signal Possible

Other former officials said it might have been intended, in part, to send a political signal that the Soviet Union was the dominant military force in the region and that the United States should not try to develop an effective military counter.

But officials said that if that was the Soviet intent, the exercise did not have that effect.

The Soviet exercise encouraged the United States to step up its efforts to develop the Rapid Deployment Force, which was embryonic at the time, and American military leaders cited the Soviet exercise to buttress their argu-

ments that the United States should conduct major exercises in the region.

"It accelerated programs for the R.D.F. in a significant way," a former official said.

The question of what diplomatic response to make to the Soviet activity caused concern at the highest levels of the Carter Administration, according to Mr. Brzezinski's book.

According to Mr. Brzezinski's account, a contentious meeting was held at the White House on Sept. 5 to assess the implications of the intelligence and to discuss what to tell Moscow.

#### 'Firm Message to Soviets'

That debate was resolved the next day, when Mr. Carter decided to deliver a "firm message to the Soviets," Mr. Brzezinski says. Mr. Carter later approved "talking points" for Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie for his meeting later that month with the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei A. Gromyko. The "talking points" restated strong American concerns about maintaining "the stability of the region."

A former ranking official recalled that the United States was not concerned that the Soviet Union might invade, but rather that it would follow up this exercise with other ambitious exercises to improve its military ability and wanted to caution Moscow not to do so.

The potential Soviet threat to Iran influenced military planning in the early part of the Reagan Administration.

At first, the Soviet threat to the Persian Gulf was cast as a top planning scenario, second only to an attack on Western Europe. Military officials said this view was supported by the Army and the Air Force, which would receive much of the funds for improving American ability to fight in the Persian Gulf.

But for the last three years, planning for the Pacific has been treated as of equal importance, reflecting concerns of the Navy.

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