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# Perestroyka at the Crossroads

An Intelligence Assessment

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM  
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## *Perestroyka at the Crossroads*

An Intelligence Assessment

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March 1990

*Perestroika at the Crossroads*

**Scope Note**

*Information available  
as of 15 March 1990  
was used in this report.*

Gorbachev's *perestroika* program is at a critical juncture. He is preoccupied by the decline of the Communist party's authority, social unrest, secessionist movements in non-Russian republics, and continued economic deterioration. These developments will come to a head this year and make it increasingly difficult for Gorbachev to continue his policy of managed democratization and marketization.

This paper assesses how the Soviet leadership is likely to respond to these challenges. It complements another DI Intelligence Assessment,

that addresses

the question of the future of the Soviet Union through the mid-1990s. Other SOVA papers on the USSR Supreme Soviet, organized crime, and the problems and prospects of local enterprises assess specific Soviet policies and institutions in more detail.

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### *Perestroika at the Crossroads*

#### Key Judgments

Reform in the Soviet Union is at a critical juncture. The Soviet leadership is increasingly preoccupied with domestic concerns, including a general inability to implement its directives in many national republics, a loss of control over society in general, and the precipitous decline of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), secessionist movements in the Baltic republics and elsewhere, serious interethnic strife, and continued economic deterioration.

These developments will have major implications this year:

- Given the widespread losses by orthodox Communist Party candidates in ongoing regional elections, the CPSU's legitimacy will probably decline dramatically while its fissures deepen, and its authority will increasingly be superseded by emerging state institutions, independent political groups, and rival political parties.
- Latvia and Estonia will press hard for increased control over their affairs and follow Lithuania if the latter is able to proceed toward independence, while differences with Moscow and separatist pressures will continue to grow in the Caucasus, Moldavia, and the Ukraine.
- Economic problems are so pronounced that the economy could actually decline in absolute terms for the first time since the war, further straining the social fabric and prompting new labor unrest.

As these problems multiply and threaten to overwhelm *perestroika*, Gorbachev will probably have to choose between moving more decisively toward a democratic vision or recognize that vision as unreachable and try to backtrack from democratization, and similarly promote economic reforms boldly or reaffirm the command economy. When confronted in the past with serious obstacles to his reform programs, Gorbachev has cast his lot with the reformers. He probably will move soon in that direction again to cope with these heightened popular demands and the deepening political, economic, and social crisis:

- Bolder measures are likely to be adopted to bolster the role of the new state institutions in the political system and to radically restructure the party along the lines laid down in the CPSU Central Committee plenums

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of February and March. Gorbachev's proposal for a stronger presidency, which could yet lead to a new form of dictatorship if not constrained, was approved at a special session of the Congress of People's Deputies on 12-15 March, but only after he agreed to limit the office's powers vis-a-vis the Supreme Soviet and the republics.

- To counter secessionist pressures, Gorbachev will probably be willing to tolerate significantly greater autonomy for the republics and try to negotiate the Baltic move toward independence on Moscow's terms.
- Gorbachev probably will take significant moves toward developing a market economy, given the likelihood that the government's stabilization program will fail to turn the economy around.

Although the result could ultimately be important progress toward a more pluralistic, economically efficient system, it is likely that political instability, social upheaval, and interethnic conflict will persist and could intensify.

In a less likely scenario, the leadership could continue to react to events, despite the dramatically changing societal environment; we believe this approach would fail and exacerbate the USSR's domestic crises and strengthen popular pressure for change.

Also possible, but unlikely in our view, is serious political retrenchment in response to heightened social turmoil—for example, use of massive force and reversal of political and economic reforms that have been instituted. In light of the growing popular pressure for change, such a crackdown would have little chance of taking hold in the absence of major repression and would seriously aggravate political and social tensions.

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## *Perestroika at the Crossroads*

*A single week in the life of a revolution is often richer in historical events than a year of normal times.*

*Robespierre*

### **The Paradox of Gorbachev's Power**

Since he became General Secretary in 1985, Gorbachev has demonstrated a keen sense for political realities and a consummate talent for political maneuver. He has pushed reform further and faster than most observers thought possible, steadily consolidated his position in the leadership, and sharply reduced the threat posed by political opponents in a series of deft personnel moves. Without a credible rival of national stature and protected by his selection as president, it is unlikely, though possible, that he will be removed in a palace coup as was Khrushchev in 1964.

Gorbachev's personal political strength, however, has not translated into the achievement of his domestic agenda. We believe *perestroika* is bogged down by bureaucratic resistance, which is rooted in the administrative apparatus of the government and Communist party. The bureaucracy is reacting to pressure to change by leaving unimplemented many reform laws already on the books. *Perestroika* also is stymied by ideological obstacles to further democratization and by the leadership's unwillingness to make tough economic decisions that would be politically unpopular.

Moreover, in recent months the task of restructuring the USSR has become more complicated and the political and economic environment more unsettled. Gorbachev is confronted with peaceful, broad-based secession movements in the Baltic republics; civil war in the Caucasus; deteriorating economic conditions; the prospect of rapid German reunification; and increased popular anxiety over crime, health conditions, and the environment. His popularity has dropped, judging by samplings of public opinion and a wide

array of reporting. The collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe reportedly has increased reformers' impatience for change at home and heightened conservatives' fears. Central party organs, traditionally the crucial instruments for social control, are in disarray and appear to meet infrequently.

Many of these problems are the direct result of Gorbachev's own policies. His reforms have brought a reduction in regime repression, an expansion of civil liberties, greater tolerance of religion, a broader range of permissible public discussion, decentralization of economic decision making, and an opportunity for previously unrepresented groups to become part of the system. Gorbachev undoubtedly hoped these steps would unleash the popular energy, initiative, and ideas needed to modernize Soviet society; to some extent, they have. His policies also have accelerated, however, the disintegration of the old system's social control mechanisms—thereby releasing powerful centrifugal forces that threaten the country's unity—before the new system is capable of handling the flood of demands unleashed by *perestroika*. This has touched off a yearning in some quarters for a dictator who would restore order and keep the country together.

### **Crisis of Political Authority**

The Congress of People's Deputies and the revitalized Supreme Soviet, though not viable without the leadership's support, will continue to gain power at the expense of the Communist party apparatus. They now play major roles in policymaking and government oversight, and their rapid development has helped politicize the Soviet society. Many legislators are actively responsive to constituent concerns; samplings of public opinion consistently show that the state institutions rank higher in public esteem than the CPSU.



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Despite the new institutions' rapid development, however, public disenchantment with them—although now small according to popular opinion polls—is likely to grow unless they can soon begin to deal with the problems facing the country. Although the Supreme Soviet is likely to back Gorbachev on most issues during its current session, which lasts until late April, debate will reflect the increasing polarization of Soviet society. A vocal minority in the legislative body will single out the party apparatus as the major drag on reform and will characterize Gorbachev's policies as half measures unable to reverse the country's decline.

Republic and local elections, already under way and continuing until June, will reduce Moscow's authority, further sharpen debate about the scope and pace of change, and increase the pressure for reform. Given election practices that are largely more democratic than the national elections last year, the widespread election already under way of many popular front candidates will make many regional soviets more radical than the national parliament. This trend will be encouraged if, as is likely, a number of reformist USSR Supreme Soviet deputies follow the lead of Boris Yel'tsin and run for republic supreme soviets, taking advantage of election laws that permit them to hold two legislative offices.

These revitalized local soviets will be a step forward for political democratization but will probably exacerbate the center's crisis of governance. In areas where pressure from below is weak, especially in parts of the Russian hinterland and Central Asia, entrenched party and government bureaucracies are likely to resist Moscow's orders to give up power to newly elected soviets. These bureaucracies will probably continue their largely centralized, repressive policies—and in parts of the RSFSR the apparatus may be allied with reactionary, Russian nationalist movements. Where the power of local apparatchiks is already eroding, independent political groups will step into the breach and begin to function as political parties. The result in the Baltic republics may increasingly resemble the social democratic politics of Central Europe and Scandinavia.

### The Party in Crisis

The Communist party, in disarray since last year's elections and lagging societal reform, will face a deepening crisis of unity and authority, despite Gorbachev's efforts to transform it. On the one hand, party apparatchiks, protective of the party's traditional prerogatives, continue to publicly defend CPSU control over economic and political life and to ignore central directives to facilitate the transfer of power to local state institutions. On the other hand, the February plenum approved a draft program of radical changes in the CPSU that has already undercut the power of the apparatus and led to the repeal in March of the party's constitutionally mandated leading role. Ultimately, it may result in a multiparty system. As work continues on the new party rules and action program for the 28th Congress next July, strains are likely to increase, with debate centering on how fast to democratize the CPSU's structure and on how the party can maintain its vanguard role without constitutional protection. A formal split at the party congress is likely—reformist remnants of the CPSU may join independent political groups and register as separate political parties, while orthodox fragments remain more coherent and identifiable. Insurgent political groups could follow the lead of their East European counterparts and press for roundtable dialogues with the local apparatchiks as the first step in this process.

Grassroots demands for greater democracy—sparked by corruption, mismanagement, and blatant disregard for reform by local officials—have prompted the recent retirements of party officials in Volgograd, Vladivostok, Sverdlovsk, Tyumen', Ufa, and other provincial centers and are likely to spread. This sudden assertiveness in the hinterlands suggests that the formerly quiescent Russian populace is beginning to respond to Gorbachev's repeated calls to step up pressure on local party machines.

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### Breaking the Bonds of the Union

The leadership probably will be unable to halt centrifugal forces set in motion by non-Russians' demands for greater autonomy or independence, which have already scuttled the regime's cautious nationality platform adopted at the September 1989 Central Committee plenum:

- Latvia and Estonia will press hard for increased control over their affairs and follow Lithuania if the latter is able to proceed toward independence. Violence in the Caucasus, now simmering, is likely to flare up again, and Soviet military forces will be engaged against the civilian population. There is no prospect of a settlement in sight. Civilian control in the Caucasus has disintegrated, and, as local Communist party machines lose credibility, nationalist movements will become the dominant centers of power. This has already happened in Azerbaijan.
- Rukh, the Ukrainian popular front, is gaining broad popular support for more republic autonomy, if not independence. A party official recently predicted that, if the party's leading role is abolished, Rukh would become a viable political party and the local Communist party would lose power. He claimed that, in the western Ukraine—where the nationalist movement is strongest—this is already the case.
- Nationalist sentiment in Moldavia has been strengthened by recent events in Romania. It is likely to grow if Romania's new regime can stabilize that country and begin to forge a viable democratic political system.
- Even the Central Asian republics are likely to seek greater autonomy, and Islam will probably be the eventual rallying point. They are already challenging Moscow's policies, especially on the pricing of the raw materials the region provides to the center's industries and on the levels of investment required to address the area's massive unemployment problems.

Gorbachev's expressed intent to co-opt these secessionist pressures by moving the USSR toward a genuine political federation may prove too little too late. His goal of a more decentralized federation has been stymied by the refusal of several republics to acknowledge Moscow's right to declare their laws unconstitutional.

The Lithuanian party's break with Moscow in December 1989 appears irreparable—most party members there support autonomy. Without effective options to heal the breach, Moscow is likely to acquiesce to the Lithuanian party's decision, despite reported demands by several CPSU Central Committee members for strong sanctions. In the face of widespread voter rejection this winter and, in all likelihood, this spring, candidates backed by the party establishment, republic parties in Georgia, and Armenia would follow the Baltic republics' lead by midsummer. All three Baltic republics have abolished their constitutions' guarantee of the party's leading role.

### Continued Economic Problems

The government's program to stabilize and reform the economy, approved by the Congress of People's Deputies in December, was a political compromise that is likely to unravel soon, making the failure of the regime's piecemeal approach to economic reform increasingly apparent. The program, which includes measures to partially deregulate prices, develop financial markets, expand property rights, and stabilize consumer markets by cutting the budget deficit and devoting more resources to the consumer sector, has raised expectations, but not yet produced its benefits. Moreover, current targets for consumer goods production are far beyond the economy's capabilities, and efforts to reduce the deficit are overly optimistic. The attempt to control income growth also will probably fail, thereby fueling inflation.

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This year, inflationary pressures and chronic shortages are likely to intensify—incomes will probably continue to increase faster than the availability of consumer goods and services. The economy will probably continue to stagnate, and even an overall decline in output is possible, particularly if the system is shocked in some way—it will remain vulnerable to labor unrest, severe weather, or other disruptions. The recent food riots in Leningrad may be repeated elsewhere. To cope with excess demand, local officials may expand food rationing, which is likely to lead to more under-the-counter sales, black-market activity, and hoarding.

Improving the economy is made more difficult because of political obstacles and a socialist ideology that makes many Soviet citizens suspicious of entrepreneurial activity. Many Soviets also regard economic reforms that widen differences in wages, increase retail prices, and threaten unemployment as lowering their already deteriorating quality of life. This has been an important factor behind leadership decisions to delay more wide-scale reforms that, for all their promise, would have unpopular consequences. While the Supreme Soviet is likely to complain loudly about the deteriorating economy, it probably will remain reluctant to approve measures that threaten the social safety net and could even backtrack on some issues.

#### Accelerated Societal Disintegration

People are openly voicing concerns for the first time about the deterioration of the social fabric and the state's inability to protect them against rising violence. Newly released statistics showing a rapid increase in street crimes have reinforced word-of-mouth stories of burglaries, physical attacks, and other crimes that have made many people fearful. Muscovites who at one time looked down their noses at New Yorkers now prefer not to venture out in the evenings for fear that they might be robbed or even killed. At the same time, criminals have become more brazen, according to frequent press accounts; a reflection of the looser social controls and diminished respect for authority that have accelerated because of democratization and more freedom of expression in Soviet

society. Other social problems that have fostered crime—such as youth alienation and alcoholism—predate Gorbachev. Although the regime has reacted by promising the police additional resources, the militia probably will have an increasingly hard time maintaining law and order because the social and economic causes of crime are not susceptible to quick fixes. The state has lost control over the possession of firearms, which have proliferated throughout the country. †

Grassroots activism is steadily mounting against environmental problems—a major concern of many voters—which, to varying degrees, plague many areas of the country. Official yielding to pressure from ecology groups has led to the closure of factories that produce goods for the entire country. The closing of pharmaceutical plants has exacerbated the shortage of medical supplies and increased unemployment. Many citizens also are concerned about the low quality of health care and housing. Recent revolts against the local party organization in Volgograd were in part prompted by these problems.

The lull in strikes since the autumn of 1988 will probably last only until the spring. Coal miners around the country, dissatisfied with implementation of their strike settlements, are already planning to walk out once warmer weather arrives, according to various reports. Workers in the metallurgical, chemical, and uranium-mining industries apparently do not have such well-laid plans, but, in discussions of where strikes might spread, Soviet leaders have publicly identified these industries. In addition, Moscow fears that railroad workers will act on earlier threats to strike; even an isolated railroad stoppage would have major repercussions. Coordinated citywide strikes, as occurred in Noril'sk in April 1989, are also possible; independent labor organizations that cut across industrial lines reportedly are forming in a number of cities.

Moscow has good reason to be worried about labor unrest. The leadership's inability to fulfill its agreement with the miners suggests that workers in other

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industries will be skeptical of government promises offered to preempt their walkouts. Moreover, workers' continuing strike threats suggest they are generally undaunted by the new strike law's requirement of a cooling-off period and arbitration before walkouts can be called and of its prohibition of strikes altogether in strategic sectors of the economy. The law's provisions for fines and possible firing of violators may temporize some conflicts—court-ordered fines helped persuade miners in Arctic Vorkuta to return to work in December 1989. Even when Gorbachev and Prime Minister Ryzhkov have endorsed and supervised the granting of concessions to strikers, material aid ordered by Moscow has not arrived on the scene because of bureaucratic sabotage and incompetence, allowing the situation to fester. (

#### Foreign Policy Challenges Ahead

Gorbachev's foreign policy achievements are one of his major political strengths, both at home and abroad. The rapid collapse of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, however, has eroded the political center and will leave him vulnerable to newly resurgent societal demands for changes, on the one hand, and traditionalist criticism on the other. Gorbachev is widely regarded as having won new friends for the Soviet Union, increasing its national security, and saving the country critical resources it can better use for important domestic needs. Successful conclusion of START and CFE agreements in 1990 would add to his luster. The elections of 18 March in East Germany, however, set the stage for closer ties between the two German states that could result in political unification by year's end. Spring elections in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary will lead to the establishment of non-Communist governments that may press for the formal dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Although some of Gorbachev's critics clearly would like to turn the clock back and reassert control over Eastern Europe and, above all, East Germany, his opponents at the top levels of the party and security apparatus recognize this cannot be done. (

#### Looming Critical Choices

As political instability, social upheaval, and the economic situation continue or worsen in the next few months, Gorbachev faces the prospect of a substantial loss of political control over events, as well as damage to his personal standing. Independent labor organizations probably will further broaden their activities and ally with independent political groups, raising the specter that they may be able to conduct simultaneous general strikes in some areas as the consumer situation deteriorates. In addition, more republics may break with Moscow. These crises will only accelerate the USSR's political polarization and further erode popular support for the moderate, centrist approach to reform Gorbachev has been pursuing. The dramatic drop in Gorbachev's Congress of People's Deputies' support in his bid for the new presidency in March 1990, compared with his almost unanimous backing in the race for the Supreme Soviet chairmanship in 1989, indicates the diminishing popular support for his policies. (

The debate between reformers and traditionalists is likely to intensify. As the political poles move further apart and the USSR's crises worsen, radicals like Boris Yel'tsin, Western-style liberals, and social democrats will push Gorbachev to move more rapidly toward a market economy and a multiparty democracy. The traditionalists, also growing and organizing—encompassing cautious reformers like Politburo member Yegor Ligachev, government and party bureaucrats, neo-Stalinists, and Russian nationalists—will probably increasingly complain that economic change is proceeding too fast and clamor for stricter discipline and the return of an "iron hand" before the country further disintegrates. (

As these problems multiply and threaten to overwhelm *perestroika*, Gorbachev will probably have to choose between moving more decisively toward a democratic vision or recognize that vision as unreachable and try to backtrack from democratization. (

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When confronted in the past with serious obstacles to his reform programs, Gorbachev has cast his lot with the reformers. His plan for a strengthened presidency, approved by the special session of the Congress of People's Deputies on 12-15 March, dramatically enhances his power to deal with the current crises and accelerates the shift of power to the state from the party—especially at the expense of the Politburo. This move will probably be the first of several steps he will take in the coming months to radicalize *perestroika*.

No matter how bold Gorbachev's program, however, continued progress will not be easy; setbacks along the way are certain, and the regime is likely to lurch from crisis to crisis. Bold reform also would be bitterly assailed by many orthodox officials as being calculated to still further undermine the Soviet system and the achievements of socialism. Nevertheless, such moves would keep Gorbachev's position strong, though not unassailable, by keeping the traditionalists off-balance and by demonstrating that *perestroika* was not at the mercy of events, but was shaping them.

#### Accelerating *Perestroika*

Central to Gorbachev's democratization strategy will probably be the acceleration of his drive to shift political power from the party apparatus to the state institutions. In addition to a stronger presidency and a revision of the constitution to remove its guaranteed leading role for the CPSU, the strategy will involve establishing the legal framework for the registration of opposition parties. Other steps could include abolishing the Congress of People's Deputies and making the Supreme Soviet directly elected, and reforming election laws to remove the opportunities that the current system provides for manipulation by the party and government apparatus.

Although the regime will be hard pressed to accommodate secessionist pressures threatening the Soviet federation, it will try to co-opt these forces by accepting a wider range of arrangements for political autonomy than it has accepted in the past and try to negotiate an orderly separation of those republics on its terms.

This could include independence in name, if not in fact, for one or more Baltic states, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, or a Soviet confederation that would allow the republics, linked by an interdependent economic system, to have significant sovereignty in all but defense matters.

In addition to further limiting the party's role in the political process, Gorbachev will take additional steps to expand reform of party practices and procedures called for by the February and March plenums. He may take several of the following steps in the next few months or at the party congress:

- Repealing the ban on CPSU factions, thereby officially accepting ideological diversity within the party.
- Allowing the formation of parties based on republic lines, including the formation of a Russian Communist party.
- Reinterpreting the principle of "democratic centralism," which has been used to ensure Communists' subordination to the central leadership.
- Combating party privileges more forcefully, especially apparatchiks' priority access to scarce goods and services.

The bleak outlook for the government's current economic package will probably provide a political opening for more radical moves toward marketization, perhaps as early as this spring. Fearful of public protest, Gorbachev and his economic stewards may at first avoid controversial initiatives, such as price reform, and try instead to introduce measures that have more public support. These could include pushing for faster privatization of agriculture—which, according to some polls, is the form of private ownership facing the least popular resistance—as a way to spur food production and thereby ease consumer shortages. To break down bureaucratic resistance to this and other marketizing reforms, however, Gorbachev would have to enter the fray and promote economic reform with the same intensity that he has shown over the past two years in revamping the country's political institutions.

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**Less Likely Scenario: A Managed Approach to Reform**

Less likely than an acceleration of *perestroika* would be a continuation of current policies. We believe this would do little to solve the USSR's domestic crises or to relieve popular pressure for change, thereby heightening the country's instability. Under this scenario:

- The Congress of People's Deputies, Supreme Soviet, and other state institutions would continue to coexist with many of the old party bodies, but their roles would not be clearly delineated and they would be waging a fight for power.
- The party leadership would continue to remain the center of political power, despite the CPSU's increasing fragmentation and declining authority.
- The regime's approach to economic stabilization and reform would continue to be a series of half measures that may prevent serious protests over consumer shortages but do little to turn the economy around.
- Republics previously seeking independence would agree to remain in the union in return for greater autonomy.
- Labor strikes or ethnic unrest may spread.

Gorbachev's personal power probably would be secure under this scenario—he might even use his stronger executive post to declare a state of emergency to deal with the economic and social crises and to reimpose order; such a move would probably intensify popular alienation, however, because the leadership would be perceived to be unable to control events. (

**Least Likely Scenario: Retrenchment**

Political retrenchment remains a possibility, but the increasing politicization of the population would make that difficult. In this scenario, social turmoil would become so unmanageable and threatening to the system that the regime would use enough force to end

political reform for some time. The most likely trigger for this would be the virtual certainty that instability would continue on all fronts, driving the leadership in a more orthodox direction—either ousting Gorbachev or forcing him to approve repressive measures to stay in office. A crackdown also might cause serious morale problems or draft resistance in the military and police forces involved in controlling domestic disorder. (

Such a repressive regime would probably rely on Russian nationalism to justify its rule. If the situation were stabilized, it would be at least temporarily less disruptive to the country than the present brand of *perestroika* and would increase order at the expense of decentralization, democratization, and human rights. It might include the following steps as well:

- A sharp curtailing of freedom of speech, press, and assembly.
- Postponement of scheduled sessions of the Congress of People's Deputies and Supreme Soviet or abolishing them entirely.
- Actions to rein in secessionist movements through economic pressure, arrest of nationalists, or possibly even the introduction of troops—particularly under a repressive regime advocating Russian nationalism.
- Some effort to restore the command economy, now broken but not yet replaced. Defense conversion, a key reform policy now under way but encountering problems, would be slowed or halted. Cooperatives might be shut down to curry popular support. (C N F)

A repressive regime would be highly unlikely to attempt to reverse the political change in Eastern Europe—the Warsaw Pact could not be re-created without an all-out invasion of these countries, even if some Soviet forces remain in the area. Such a regime would be more hostile to the West, however, and would strongly denounce Western criticism of its actions.