

SPECIAL ANALYSIS

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USSR: Brezhnev at 75

by [REDACTED] CIA

When President Brezhnev observes his 75th birthday tomorrow, he can look back with considerable pride on his 17-year tenure. He is not an indispensable leader, and there have always been collective restraints on his authority. Brezhnev, however, is the regime's pivotal figure, the primary architect of policy, the main roadblock to policy initiatives taken by others, and the chief arbiter of differences within the Politburo. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
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Under Brezhnev's stewardship, Soviet power and influence have expanded substantially. The USSR has attained strategic parity with the US and has had considerable success in influencing government and public opinion in NATO countries on key defense issues. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
6.1(c)>10<25Yrs
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Moreover, Moscow has secured a measure of international legitimacy for the postwar division of Germany and the status quo in Eastern Europe. In the Third World, the Soviets aided North Vietnam in delivering the US its worst foreign policy defeat of the postwar period, strengthened relations with Cuba, expanded Soviet power into Afghanistan, and facilitated the installation of a Marxist government in Angola. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
6.1(c)>10<25Yrs
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These gains were achieved without direct military confrontation with the US. This was partly because the USSR, through the use of allies and surrogates, has been able to avoid employing its ground forces except in Afghanistan. Brezhnev's success in establishing a detente relationship with the US was another contributing factor. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
6.1(c)>10<25Yrs
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Domestic Performance

For most of the period since Brezhnev assumed power, the USSR has experienced considerable political and social tranquility. This stability has been based on economic progress, careful accommodation of major elite interest groups, and improvements in the population's material welfare. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
6.1(c)>10<25Yrs
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EO 12958 6.1(c)>10<25Yrs
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EO 12958
6.1(c)>10<25Yrs
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During Brezhnev's first 10 years in power, the USSR was able to achieve overall economic growth, while making major gains both for the consumer and in military spending. Brezhnev discarded Khrushchev's "populist" reforms that had unsettled professionals and repressed open dissent. By rewarding political conformity with personal security and a rising living standard, his regime won popular acceptance. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
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Orderly procedures and careful marshaling of bureaucratic support for cautious, incremental policy steps have been hallmarks of Brezhnev's tenure. He ended Khrushchev's assaults on powerful institutions. He also avoided sweeping personnel changes, excessive reorganization, and radical alterations of resource allocation priorities. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
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To conciliate the party, Brezhnev gave officials job security. He has used large defense budgets to keep the military content, and his emphasis on internal security tasks has restored the morale of the KGB. [REDACTED]

Negative Aspects

EO 12958
6.1(c)>10<25Yrs
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Brezhnev bears responsibility for the growing ossification of the political system and for the continuing failure to deal effectively with the economic slowdown. Economic problems will create serious difficulties for Brezhnev's heirs and cast doubt on whether his policies will long survive him. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
6.1(c)>10<25Yrs
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Failure to satisfy the appetite of the increasingly materialistic Soviet consumer--an appetite whetted by his greater access to information from the West--is eroding the regime's legitimacy. The adverse effect on labor productivity of this failure undercuts efforts to turn around the falling GNP growth rate. [REDACTED]

EO 12958
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The economic pinch threatens to unleash potentially disruptive friction between competing claimants for resources after Brezhnev departs. Moreover, the economic slowdown increases the burden of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, of Soviet support for clients and surrogates in Third World areas, and of Soviet military spending. [REDACTED]

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EO 12958
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In neglecting to prepare for his succession, Brezhnev has increased the chances for a divisive power struggle after he is gone. His failure to rejuvenate the aging elite probably ensures the future departure of many senior officials within a short period of time. [REDACTED]

Outlook

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EO 12958 6.1(c) >10<25Yrs
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Maneuvering among contenders for Brezhnev's job has already begun. He may survive another year or more, during which the paralysis of internal policy will continue. If his successors are to build upon Brezhnev's accomplishments, however, they must turn their attention to dealing more effectively with domestic problems, particularly, the economy. [REDACTED]

EO 12958 6.1(c) >10<25Yrs
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