



Master File

49. Sino-Soviet Relations in the Early 1980s

National Intelligence Estimate

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II. THE INTERPLAY OF VARIABLES TO DATE

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The Afghan Situation

22. A further and still more recent complicating factor has been the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. There can be little doubt that here again both the Chinese and the Soviets believe that a shift favorable to Moscow has occurred. Despite Afghan distaste for the Soviet occupiers and continuing guerrilla resistance, Afghanistan is being transformed to satellite status. The balance of power in Southwest Asia has also been affected, with immediate consequences for China's major ally in the region, Pakistan. Psychologically as well as physically the Soviet "ring" around China has been extended, and the initiative in this volatile area now rests largely with Moscow. The Chinese, moreover, cannot afford to ignore the demonstration of Soviet "will" that Moscow's move into Afghanistan represents.

23. From China's point of view there are, however, a number of favorable aspects to the new situation. The Soviet action underlines and illustrates Beijing's warnings about the USSR's "hegemonistic" ambitions, which are now likely to be taken more seriously by the rest of the world. Soviet troops may become bogged down in extended fighting. India may see both the need and the opportunity to distance itself from the Soviet Union and improve its relations with China in an effort to prevent any of the other major actors from gaining a preponderant position in South Asia. The Muslim world's strongly negative reaction to the Soviet move, moreover, was doubtless gratifying to Beijing. Of at least equal consequence, in Beijing's eyes, has been the firmer anti-Soviet stance taken by the US Government, the accompanying indications of a change in public mood in America on key foreign policy issues, and evidence that Sino-US ties are likely to deepen and broaden—especially in security-related areas—in the wake of the Soviet action in Afghanistan. But the Chinese leadership cannot yet be certain how permanent the anti-Soviet mood is likely to be in the Muslim world, in the United States, or in Western Europe. The Soviet military presence in Afghanistan,

on the other hand, appears likely to be long lasting. In short, the Chinese leaders are likely to conclude that the danger to Chinese security has increased as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. They may conclude also that the political opportunities presented by the negative reaction to that event could offset, at least partially, this heightened danger.

III. FACTORS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CHINESE POLICY

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The Afghan Factor

41. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan will probably strengthen Chinese intransigence. Beijing's response to the Soviet action has been strong and has included the indefinite suspension of the new talks with Moscow. Indeed, to the degree that Soviet behavior in this instance has tended to fulfill dire Chinese prophecies regarding Soviet "hegemonism" it tends also to reinforce the conviction among many Chinese leaders that determined opposition to Soviet expansionism is the only viable course open to China. Few Chinese of any political stature are likely to be willing to ignore concrete Chinese interests that have been challenged by the Soviet military expansion into Southwest Asia—interests which are particularly important because they lie on China's periphery.

42. Thus, a consensus is likely to be maintained in the belief that what Beijing terms the Soviet "offensive" political and military posture in the world is so fundamental to Soviet policy as to be unlikely to be modified significantly by any but the most sweeping Chinese concessions. This judgment may be reinforced in Chinese eyes by the consideration that Moscow could well become bogged down in a consuming guerrilla war in Afghanistan—a development that would tend to sap Soviet energies, just as the Chinese believe the struggle in Kampuchea saps Vietnamese energy and material resources.

43. Although we think the odds favor the maintenance of this consensus view, we nevertheless think Soviet actions in Afghanistan could possibly have another effect. The Chinese have called this development the most important in Soviet policy since the Czechoslovak affair of 1968—an event which, coupled with the Sino-Soviet border clashes of the following year, caused China to reorient its international posture. We think the public linkage to Czechoslovakia in 1968 accurately reflects the Chinese view of the significance of the Soviet thrust into Afghanistan.

While this assessment tends to reinforce longstanding Chinese assumptions, if the Soviets were to crush the Afghan resistance, it could also lead to a review of longstanding Chinese assumptions that hostilities are not imminent. It is possible that some Chinese leaders, impressed by the Soviet action in Afghanistan, will infer that Moscow will be more willing to use force in future disputes. In this context these leaders may conclude that the situation is now more conducive to major hostilities that could involve China.

44. In a context of heightened danger the Chinese are likely to assess carefully the attitudes of the United States. In some respects they seem to believe that some initial US responses to the changing situation in Southwest Asia have been largely rhetorical and perhaps somewhat hasty—a situation that, in their view, could raise US-Soviet tensions without actually restraining Soviet behavior. If these views were sustained the Chinese could move to lower the temperature of their own quarrel with Moscow (reducing propaganda attacks, for example, resuming pro forma political talks, and eschewing provocative actions of their own) without actively moving toward reconciliation with the USSR. If, however, Beijing were to perceive signs that the West, and the United States in particular, were acquiescing in the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and were seeking to mute differences with the USSR, advocates of a more conciliatory approach to the USSR might be able to argue more convincingly that China too must buy a "breathing space." We think these outcomes less likely than reinforcement of current tendencies. But having emphasized the significance of Afghanistan as a test of willpower and determination to resist the Soviets, the Chinese to that extent are putting their anti-Soviet strategy to the test. In such circumstances, the international behavior of the West, and particularly of the United States as the main strategic counterweight to the USSR, is of particular importance.

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V. PROSPECTS

75. The interplay of the factors and variables considered in this Estimate appears most likely to produce the following results over the next three to five years.

76. Resolution of the impasse in the Sino-Soviet border negotiations is unlikely, particularly since the Chinese continue to insist that movement in this area precede rather than follow a general rapprochement. It is very improbable that the Soviets will begin to reduce their military dispositions along the border and in Mongolia as China is likely to continue to demand, and probable that these dispositions will instead continue to be improved.

77. On balance, we believe there is only a small chance of Sino-Soviet hostilities during this period. This chance could be somewhat increased in the event of a new Chinese attack on Vietnam, which we consider possible but not probable, and would increase further thereafter in proportion to the depth and persistence of the Chinese assault. However, the possibility that these variables will cumulatively net out differently is considerable. The likelihood of Sino-

Soviet military conflict thus will reflect a high degree of uncertainty over the next few years.

78. The Soviets will almost certainly persist in their support of Vietnamese ambitions in conflict with perceived Chinese interests, will continue their military presence in Afghanistan, and will very probably continue military and political activities in many other places throughout the world and around China's periphery, which will reinforce Chinese fear of a growing Soviet geopolitical threat. Chinese antagonism toward the Soviet Union will, on balance, not decline, although arguments about how best to deal with the Soviet threat could arise in China. On balance also we believe China will continue to demand far-reaching and unacceptable prerequisites from the Soviet Union for any notable improvement in the relationship, as these demands are a result, rather than a cause, of the antagonism.

79. In the event of important changes in the US posture toward China or the Soviet Union favorable to the Soviet Union and adverse to China, the likelihood of which is outside our consideration, the Chinese leadership might make some concessions to the Soviet Union that would otherwise be unacceptable. The extent of such possible concessions cannot now be judged; we believe in any event that they will be a function of the Chinese assessment of how immediate is the threat China faces from the USSR.