

**The Development of
Soviet Military Power:
Trends Since 1965 and
Prospects for the 1980s**

**Summary: The Past,
Present, and Future of
Soviet Military Power**

The Soviet Military Effort Under Brezhnev

For more than two decades, the USSR has been engaged in a major buildup of its military forces. In the Khrushchev era the emphasis was on strategic nuclear programs, but since Brezhnev came to power in 1964 there has been an across-the-board expansion and modernization of all the Soviet forces. Among the many factors underlying this buildup, the most basic is the attitude of the Soviet leaders that military might is a necessary and effective instrument of policy in an inherently unstable world. This attitude has been embodied in and reinforced by an ambitious military doctrine that calls for forces structured to fight and win future conflicts and by a political and economic system that gives priority to military requirements

Taken together, these conditions have imparted a considerable momentum to the Soviet military effort. Thus, despite changes in the international environment, Brezhnev's detente policy, and Strategic Arms Limitation agreements, the overall pace of the Soviet military buildup has remained steady during the Brezhnev years. Annual Soviet military spending has nearly doubled in real terms and now consumes over one-eighth of GNP; military manpower has increased by one-third to more than 5 million;¹ defense research and development facilities have more than doubled in size; and weapon production facilities have expanded by nearly 60 percent

The number of Soviet strategic nuclear weapons delivery vehicles has increased from a few hundred in 1965 to about 2,500 today, overturning the previous US quantitative superiority. (The United States has just over 2,000 delivery vehicles.) The accuracy of the newest Soviet weapons now exceeds that of US systems, creating a major threat to US fixed, land-based missiles. These improvements have enhanced the capability of Soviet forces to fight a nuclear war. Moreover, by hardening their land-based missile launchers and putting a greater number of ballistic missiles on submarines, the Soviets have made their strategic forces so survivable that even after absorbing a US attack they could destroy most of the US population and most US military and economic targets in a retaliatory strike

¹ This figure includes about 1 million men who fulfill roles that the United States would not consider related to national security.

Soviet planners also emphasize defense against strategic weapons, but their defenses cannot prevent similar devastation from a US retaliatory strike:

- The Soviets have introduced systems to detect and defend against ballistic missiles, but technical limitations and treaty constraints render them largely ineffective against a large-scale US missile attack.
- They have expanded and improved their air defense network (the world's largest), giving it a good capability against high-flying aircraft but only limited effectiveness against low-altitude penetration.
- Defense against missile-launching submarines is poor despite its high priority in naval planning, because the search and detection capabilities of Soviet forces are insufficient to locate submarines in the open ocean.
- Continuing attention to civil defense has provided protection for virtually all political leaders, most key workers, and about 10 percent of the urban residents; but the rest of the population would be dependent on evacuation, and economic and military facilities are still vulnerable

The Soviets have eliminated the West's former edge in short- and medium-range nuclear delivery systems in Europe. The number of Soviet tactical surface-to-surface missiles there has increased by a third, and the number of aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons in Central Europe has more than tripled. The Soviets have broken the monopoly held by NATO since the 1960s in nuclear artillery and have introduced other new tactical delivery systems with improved ranges, accuracy, readiness, and destructive power. They may also have nuclear landmines. With these improvements, Soviet theater forces are now in a better position to match any NATO escalation of a European conflict from one level of nuclear war to another, without using long-range theater nuclear systems based in the USSR.² Those systems have also been improved by deployment of the SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missile with three independently targetable warheads and of the Backfire bomber with improved payload and air defense penetration capabilities

To the extent that Soviet intercontinental nuclear forces now check those of the United States and Soviet gains in theater nuclear forces have offset those of NATO, the balance of conventional forces in Europe has become increasingly significant. In the conventional area, the Soviets expanded their

² The Soviets would hope to confine a NATO-Warsaw Pact war to European territory, avoiding the use of systems based in the Soviet Union so as not to invite retaliatory attacks. Nevertheless, they doubt that nuclear escalation in such a war could be held within bounds.

already large ground and theater air forces during the 1965-80 period and introduced modern systems, some of them equal or superior to those of NATO:

- Total ground forces manpower increased by nearly 50 percent, while the number of major weapons in a division increased by about a third and artillery firepower more than doubled.
- The number, variety, and capability of air defense systems available to tactical commanders increased rapidly, with deployment of all-weather missile-equipped interceptor aircraft and mobile air defense missiles and guns.
- The latest Soviet tanks (now common to most first-line Soviet units in Eastern Europe, but not yet widely deployed among units in the USSR) have armor that provides good protection against the most advanced antitank weapons.
- New tactical aircraft deployed in the 1970s have increased ninefold the weight of ordnance that Soviet theater air forces could deliver against targets in NATO's rear areas (the Benelux countries and parts of France, for example). More accurate bombing systems (radars, laser rangefinders, and computers) and precision munitions have improved Soviet capabilities against point targets and largely eliminated NATO's rear areas as sanctuaries in conventional war.

On the other hand, the Warsaw Pact's military potential is affected by its political cohesion and its will to use force. Pact performance on the field of battle would be heavily influenced by the attitudes and effectiveness of the non-Soviet armies, which have been assigned major roles in both combat and support. These armies are less modern than that of the USSR. More important, the solidarity and enthusiasm that they would exhibit in combat against NATO are open to serious question.

The Soviets also maintain large forces opposite China. Since the late 1960s, the number of Ground Forces divisions along the Sino-Soviet border has doubled and their total manpower has more than tripled. Expansion of Soviet tactical aviation forces since the late 1960s has also been directed primarily at China.

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In the early 1960s, the Soviet Navy was a coastal defense force with limited capabilities for operations in the open ocean, but it is being transformed into an outward-looking force deploying heavily armed surface ships, high-speed submarines, and advanced aircraft. The number of ships has changed little, but the proportion of large surface combatants and nuclear-powered submarines is growing. Qualitatively, Soviet naval forces remain vulnerable to air and submarine attack; nuclear-powered submarines are noisier (and thus easier to detect) than their Western counterparts; and capabilities for distant combat operations—such as the landing of troops and provision of carrier-based air support—are extremely limited. But their numerous missile-equipped surface ships, submarines, and aircraft enable the Soviets to control their own coastal waters and to contest the use of open-ocean areas by the West

To support the expanded combat capabilities of their forces, the Soviets have introduced space systems for communications, intelligence collection, navigation, and other military functions. They now have an average of about 90 satellites operational at any given time, of which about 70 percent are military and another 15 percent have both military and civilian uses. The Soviets have also introduced new procedures and systems for controlling military operations. These include an increase in the operational authority of the General Staff, creation of new intermediate levels of command, introduction of mobile and hardened command posts, and deployment of new communications systems. These measures have improved the flexibility, reliability, security, and survivability of command

As their military power has grown at the intercontinental, theater nuclear, and conventional levels, the Soviets have increasingly used military instruments to achieve political gains, especially in the Third World. Soviet exports of military equipment to the Third World have increased rapidly since their beginning in the mid-1950s. During 1980, some \$14 billion worth of hardware was sold to the Third World, and in 1979 nearly 15,000 Soviet advisers were in Third World countries—more than four times as many as in 1965. Operations of naval ships outside home waters increased sixfold between 1965 and 1970, fluctuated for several years, and increased sharply again during 1979 and 1980. Soviet naval ships now make several hundred visits to Third World ports each year

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Military involvement in Third World conflicts has become more active and direct:

- In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Soviet air and air defense forces were used in defensive roles in the Middle East.
- In the mid-to-late 1970s, Soviet logistic support transported Cuban intervention forces to Angola and Ethiopia and sustained them there.
- In 1979, Soviet combat ground and air units invaded Afghanistan—the first direct involvement of Soviet ground forces outside the Soviet Bloc

To support their growing military involvement overseas, the Soviets have improved the ability of their forces to project power:

- The lift capability of primary Soviet amphibious ships has more than tripled since 1965. These ships can transport some 10,000 to 12,000 men (but they are spread out among four fleet areas). Merchant ships, some of which have been specifically designed to support naval operations, are also available.
- The firepower, mobility, and air defense capabilities of the six combat-strength airborne divisions have improved with the deployment of more modern weapons.
- By introducing heavy transport aircraft, the Soviets have doubled their airlift capacity (but their capabilities remain inferior to those of the United States)

The Soviets have not developed many forces specifically for overseas invasion. They rely instead on general-purpose forces designed principally for use in Europe but also suitable for operations in more distant areas to which they can deploy without opposition. Most areas of vital interest to them are close to the USSR, however, and thus Soviet requirements for long-distance intervention forces are less demanding than those of the United States

Factors Affecting Future Military Programs

As the Soviet leaders formulate their defense plans for the future, they face major external and domestic uncertainties:

- The fluid international situation dictates a prudent defense posture, and the Soviets' perceptions of emerging military threats argue especially for continued qualitative improvement in forces.

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- On the other hand, to maintain even a modest rate of economic growth, those leaders must allocate more resources to capital investment and must improve labor productivity, in part by providing a rising standard of living.

This dilemma could cause political tension, particularly at a time of leadership transition.

These uncertainties make it particularly difficult to forecast Soviet policies. We have sufficient information on each of the factors involved, however, to make fairly informed judgments about their probable impact on the development of Soviet military power in the 1980s and to examine the possible effects of discontinuities in policy.

In the international arena, the Soviets are concerned by the prospect that the United States will augment its defense effort, by China's opening to the West, and by the possibility that US opposition to Soviet global aspirations will increase. They are troubled by instability on their borders—an insurgency in Afghanistan that they have been unable to suppress, an unpredictable regime in Iran whose fundamentalist Islamic ideology could spread to Muslim minorities in the USSR, and a major threat to Communist Party control in Poland. They probably view the 1980s as a decade of heightened competition, in which they will run a greater risk of military confrontation with the United States and of actual combat with major powers.

While they see increasing tension, the leaders and planners also see foreign nations making military efforts that threaten to undercut the strengths of Soviet forces and exacerbate their weaknesses. These threats, as well as deficiencies that the Soviets currently perceive in their own military capabilities, make continued pursuit of new weapon programs essential from the perspective of the Soviet planners. They see the possible US deployment of the M-X missile, for example, as a dual threat:

- Its survivability (from deployment on mobile launchers or in multiple shelters) could force the Soviets to expend all of their ICBM weapons against the M-X alone, were they to undertake a massive counterforce strike.
- Its accuracy increases the risk that the United States could neutralize the Soviets' land-based ICBMs, which provide nearly 75 percent of the weapons and warheads on their intercontinental nuclear delivery vehicles.

The Soviets also consider NATO's plan to deploy advanced ballistic and cruise missiles in Europe as part of a US strategy to threaten Soviet ICBMs and to reduce Soviet capabilities for theater war in Europe

Many other military developments are a cause of concern to Soviet planners:

- They foresee that new Western ballistic missile submarines, with their greatly enlarged patrol areas, will further tax their inadequate antisubmarine capabilities.
- They are watching China's lengthening nuclear reach and the upgrading of French and British strategic forces.
- They regard NATO's programs for armor and antiarmor systems, precision munitions, and nuclear weapons as substantial and technologically challenging.
- They believe they must accelerate their efforts to compete with NATO in tactical aircraft and air defenses.
- They are worried about the antisubmarine capabilities of the West and the vulnerability of their ships to air and submarine attack.
- They see the widespread deployment of cruise missiles on US ships as reducing their capabilities in ship-to-ship warfare and—if the long-range Tomahawk cruise missile is deployed—as introducing a new strategic threat to Soviet territory.
- Finally, instability on their borders and US plans to form a rapid deployment force have increased Soviet concern about military developments in areas near the USSR

As they attempt to react to the wide array of situations they perceive as either promising or threatening, Soviet policymakers will face a far more constrained resources picture than in the 1960s and 1970s:

- Soviet economic growth, which has been declining since the 1950s, has slowed to a crawl in the past several years. The real average annual growth in GNP in 1979 and 1980 was a little over 1 percent—the worst in any two-year period since World War II.
- In the 1980s, developing energy and demographic problems probably will hold GNP growth to an average of 2 percent or less—only half the rate at which defense expenditures have been growing.
- If military spending is allowed to follow its past trend, its share of economic output could increase from about one-eighth now to over one-sixth in 1990.

- More importantly, this increased military burden would reduce significantly the share of the annual increment to GNP that can be distributed among civilian claimants to ease the political tensions that arise from competition for resources. Military programs—especially those for nonstrategic forces—divert key resources from the production of critically needed equipment for agriculture, industry, and transportation

The problems of Soviet leaders in allocating resources could be further complicated by a political succession. Soviet President Brezhnev is 74 and in poor health, and most of his colleagues are also in their seventies, many of them also ailing. The departure of these men could affect military policy, but probably not immediately. The process of Soviet national security planning and decisionmaking is highly centralized, secretive, and resistant to fundamental change. It is strongly influenced by military and defense-industrial organizations, represented by men who have held their positions for many years, providing a continuity of plans and programs. Because of this momentum, and the political clout of the men and institutions that support defense programs, we doubt that Soviet emphasis on military power would decrease in the early stages of a leadership succession

The attitudes of the senior leaders are another buffer against any quick change of direction. If Brezhnev leaves the scene soon, the chances are that he would be replaced by one of the current group, most of whom share his general policy views. The two most likely candidates are party secretaries Kirilenko (who has expressed views somewhat more conservative than Brezhnev's on national security policy) and Chernenko (who has always been very close to Brezhnev). Eventually, of course, the interim leader will be replaced by a younger man; but among the younger Politburo members who appear to be candidates, most also seem to favor a continued high priority on defense. The effect of a political transition is inherently unpredictable, however, and we cannot exclude the possibility that major policy changes could result

In contrast to the imponderables of the economic and political environments, we have a good capability to identify most future Soviet weapon systems. The forces of the 1980s will be equipped primarily with systems already in the field and secondarily with those now entering production or in late stages of development. (Because it takes a decade or more to develop and test modern weapon systems, few of those now in early stages of development could be introduced in significant numbers in the 1980s.) We believe that we have identified about 85 percent of the new systems likely to be introduced

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in this decade. Knowing Soviet military requirements and the amount of available development and production resources, we can postulate others. These identified and postulated systems, plus existing systems, will make up well over 90 percent of the weapons in the field in 1990.

Soviet Military Power in the 1980s

Taking these factors into account, we can project in broad outline the prospects for further development of Soviet military power in the 1980s. We have made several projections. The most detailed (our baseline projection) is the one most consistent with currently available evidence. It assumes that pressures in favor of continuing the current policies—pressures from external challenges, from the Soviets' ambitious military doctrine, and from the powerful institutions that support defense programs—will offset to a large extent any inclination toward change that might arise from the leaders' growing economic concerns. The baseline projection allows for adjustments to defense expenditures—provided they do not significantly affect military capabilities.

Because changes in political and economic conditions could lead to discontinuities in policy, we present three alternative projections: two that require an acceleration in the growth of military spending and one that requires an absolute reduction. We consider all of these to be less likely than the baseline projection but present a discussion of them intended to suggest reasonable limits to the options open to Soviet policymakers.

Baseline Projection. For our baseline projection we estimate—on the basis of the weapon production and development programs we have identified—that the Soviets will continue their policy of balanced force development. Within the outlines of this continuity, however, we expect them to increase their emphasis on strategic forces that can survive a US attack, on strategic defense, and (to a lesser extent) on forces for the projection of Soviet power to distant areas. Manpower constraints will limit increases in the size of forces, but improvements will continue rapidly as new weapons become available. Improvements in Soviet military forces will lead to growing capabilities in many areas—including some areas of traditional Western strength.

We expect the Soviets to carry out programs aimed at maintaining or increasing their lead over the United States in most measures of intercontinental nuclear attack capability and at upgrading their nuclear war-fighting capabilities. They will continue to improve the accuracy of their ICBMs and

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will develop a variety of payload options for responding to US deployment of new ICBMs. As a result, the Soviet ICBM force—with or without the SALT II Treaty—will have the theoretical potential to destroy most of the warheads on US land-based missiles throughout the decade. This potential will be greatest in the early 1980s, before the United States can deploy a new ICBM. But even in that early period, US forces could conduct a massive retaliatory strike.

To maintain survivable strategic forces in the face of a potential threat to their own fixed, land-based missiles, we expect the Soviets to increase the capability of their submarine-launched ballistic missiles and possibly (especially in the absence of SALT constraints) to deploy land-mobile ICBMs. They may introduce a new strategic bomber or an aircraft to carry long-range cruise missiles, and they may already be testing a sea-launched strategic cruise missile.

Should strategic arms control negotiations be resumed, these weapon developments could complicate monitoring—an already difficult US intelligence task. Land-mobile strategic weapons and cruise missiles cannot be counted with high confidence. As a result, monitoring strategic arms control agreements will be much more difficult in the 1980s than it was in the 1970s.

Air defense improvements have been identified at Soviet test ranges, and some are now entering deployment. These include new surface-to-air missiles and interceptor aircraft with radars that enable them to detect and engage low-flying targets. These defenses could make penetration of Soviet airspace much more difficult for large manned bombers of current types. The small size and low flight altitudes of modern cruise missiles present a more complicated problem, however, and we project that Soviet defenses will be less effective against these new systems during the 1980s.

The Soviets continue their antiballistic missile (ABM) programs, but the technical difficulties of detecting, identifying, and intercepting ballistic missiles have kept progress slow. Moreover, the deployment constraints of the 1972 ABM Treaty severely limit the effectiveness of defenses against missiles. (Should the Soviets abrogate the treaty, they could deploy ABM defenses widely in the latter half of the decade.) We expect continuing Soviet interest in antisatellite defenses and in high-technology systems for strategic defense. Possible developments in the late 1980s could include a space-based antisatellite laser system and a few laser air defense weapons. Continuing

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Soviet naval programs will continue to emphasize open-ocean forces and the deployment of air power to sea. These programs will improve the Navy's capabilities to contest areas of the open ocean with the West. Ships and submarines with a new, long-range cruise missile are being introduced to offset Western gains in shipborne defenses. The Soviets are producing nuclear-powered attack submarines at an increasing rate, and the submarines introduced in this decade probably will be quieter (and harder to detect and track) than current models.

Another naval development has important implications for Soviet military power—we have evidence of activities that probably are related to a program for a new aircraft carrier. It could be introduced in the late 1980s and probably would carry standard fighter or attack aircraft and be nuclear-powered. (The Soviets have helicopter carriers and ships that carry short-range, vertical and short takeoff and landing aircraft, but this could be their first attack aircraft carrier.) It would improve the Navy's air defenses and—more importantly—it could inaugurate a capability for projection of air power in distant areas. The USSR could not achieve a large-scale capability in the 1980s—only one or two carriers could be available—but this could emerge as a major theme in the 1990s and later.

We expect other improvements in Soviet forces for power projection, besides the aircraft carrier. Introduction of a new class of landing ships—if it occurs in the 1980s—would increase the troop-lift capability of the Navy. The Soviets are reportedly working on a large transport aircraft, similar in size to the US C5A. If they produce such an aircraft, their airlift capabilities by 1990 could be substantially improved.

In the 1980s, the Soviets will continue to improve their military space and command and control systems. We expect them to place in orbit new military space stations, to be used for intelligence purposes, and new unmanned satellites for real-time photographic reconnaissance and the detection of missile launches. We also expect further improvements in command and control, with emphasis on mobile systems and on the use of computers.

With these new forces and capabilities, we expect the Soviets to maintain a high level of activity in the Third World to achieve both military and political goals. They may be willing to use their own forces more actively in the Third World, even if the activity brings a greater risk of confrontation with Western powers.

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If the Soviets carry out the programs that we have identified, their defense expenditures will continue to increase in real terms throughout the 1980s. The precise rate of increase is difficult to predict. It could be as high as 4 percent a year, if no constraints are imposed by arms control agreements and if the Soviets do not alter the support structure of their armed forces. A rate of 4 percent would increase the military drain on the economy and the potential for internal political problems

In an attempt to address these problems, the Soviets might try to reduce the growth of their defense spending to, say, 2 percent or less. To accomplish this they could:

- Cut back the current production of some systems while continuing development of follow-ons.
- Stretch out new production programs and postpone the target dates for force modernization.
- Attempt to improve efficiency in the military and the defense industries.

They could even take advantage of the limited financial savings that arms control agreements would permit by deploying fewer weapons—but their past actions suggest that they would procure forces to the limits of any such agreements.³

If the Soviets chose to make adjustments, they could spread them out among all of the military services, minimizing the impact on the rate of modernization of the forces as a whole. These changes could be risky from the point of view of the military, but might be attractive to political leaders with a broader perspective. We believe adjustments sufficient to hold the growth in spending down to 2 percent would not significantly alter the major judgments of our baseline projection

Alternative Projections. More radical changes in Soviet military policy are possible. Currently available evidence provides no clear indications that they are in the offing, but the interaction of political, economic, and technological forces in the 1980s could conceivably lead to major discontinuities.⁴

³ Arms control agreements could also reduce uncertainty about Western military programs and thus enable the Soviets to avoid some of the costs of hedging against uncertainty

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One possibility is that the Soviets will reduce the level of military expenditures absolutely (rather than merely reducing the rate of increase). We believe this to be unlikely in the near term. Their dim view of the international environment would argue against such cuts, and the guidelines they have published for their next Five-Year Plan imply continued growth in defense spending. We have not detected any evidence that the Soviets are considering reductions.

Nevertheless, reductions cannot be excluded as a long-run possibility; and, as one alternative projection, we have examined the consequences of a cut in defense expenditures. We believe that to reduce expenditure levels in real terms the Soviets would have to alter the roles and missions of some of their armed forces. They probably would spread the cuts among all the military services—making them somewhat deeper in general purpose forces, especially ground forces. General purpose forces are larger than strategic forces and they take up more of the defense budget and use more of the energy, manpower, and key material resources needed by the civilian economy. Production of general purpose weapon systems competes directly with production of equipment for transportation, agriculture, and manufacturing. (The resources devoted to production of strategic weapons, on the other hand, are more specialized and less readily transferable to important civilian uses.)

Another alternative projection considers the possibility that the Soviets will increase defense spending more rapidly than in the past, to support a stepped-up military competition. This effort (focused on either strategic or conventional forces) could expand the forces and improve capabilities more rapidly than is forecast in our baseline projection. The range of program options is broad enough to permit a major increase in defense spending, and Soviet military-industrial capacity is large enough to sustain it. Such an increase would affect the distribution of economic resources significantly, however (especially if it were in conventional forces), and its political consequences could be extremely serious:

- The Soviets' ability to increase investment resources critical to long-term economic growth would be reduced substantially.
- Per capita consumption might decline in real terms late in the decade.
- Key sectors of the economy would be disrupted.

We do not know at what point the Soviets would find an increased defense burden to be unacceptable. This would depend on the international environment and the outlook of the leaders in power. Judging by their past behavior,

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we believe that they would prefer, if possible, to keep defense expenditures within their current growth rate, while still pursuing their military goals.

- The Soviets probably will seek to constrain US programs and to reduce their uncertainty about future US capabilities by urging further arms control negotiations.
- They will also attempt, through propaganda and diplomacy, to undermine Western cohesiveness on security issues and to slow the pace of West European defense programs.

The Soviets' incentives for such actions will increase as their economic growth slows in the 1980s. But Soviet leaders place a high premium on military power and will not, for economic reasons alone, accept constraints on defense programs that they consider vital to their interest

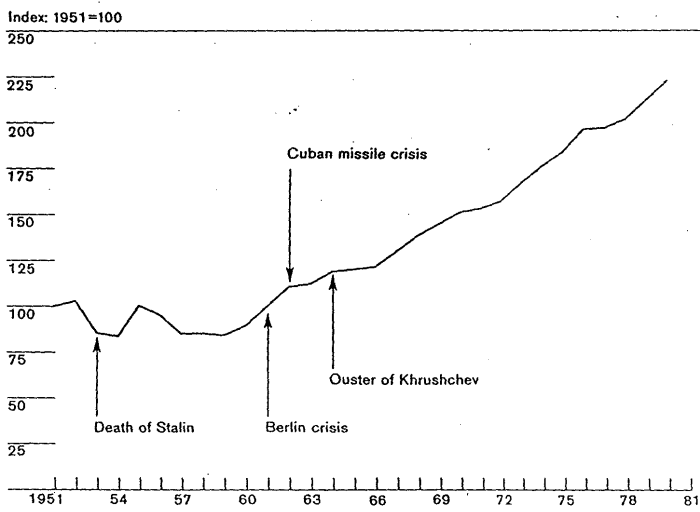
Background and Structure of This Report

This report is based on a major interdisciplinary research effort carried out by the National Foreign Assessment Center during the 1979-80 period. It surveys the development of Soviet military power in the Brezhnev era—a period of relative economic prosperity and political stability—and outlines its probable evolution in the 1980s, when declining economic growth, a leadership succession, and a complex international environment will pose difficult choices for Soviet political and military leaders. To improve our understanding of these choices, more than 40 individual research projects were undertaken by the Offices of Central Reference, Economic Research, Political Analysis, Scientific and Weapons Research, and Strategic Research.

Beginning with a discussion of the Soviet military buildup under Brezhnev and of the factors underlying it, the paper then discusses the forces that will affect Soviet power and policies in the 1980s. These ideas underlie our baseline projection for the period through 1990 (page 73). Finally, several alternative courses of action that the Soviets could follow are outlined, as well as the conditions and constraints that bear on Soviet behavior and the clues that could alert us to changes in Soviet military policy

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Trends in Soviet Defense Expenditures
(based on estimates in constant 1970 rubles)



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