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## CAPABILITIES OF THE SOVIET THEATER FORCES

### THE PROBLEM

To estimate the role and capabilities of the Soviet theater forces, especially against the NATO area in Europe, at present and over the next two years or so.

### FOREWORD

1. As considered in this estimate, the components of the Soviet theater forces include: the ground forces and their weapons; tactical aircraft and missiles; supporting and logistical elements such as transport aircraft; and major portions of the surface naval and submarine fleets. The roles and capabilities of those Soviet forces which would perform other primary military missions, notably long-range striking forces and air and missile defense forces, are the subject of other National Intelligence Estimates.

2. In recent years, Soviets have debated at greater depth than in the past the probable nature of a general nuclear conflict between the Bloc and the West, and the information available to us reflects this increased attention. In this estimate, particularly in Chapters I and IV, we consider mainly the employment of Soviet theater forces in general nuclear war, taking some account of the way in which Soviet plans might be affected if operations were begun on short notice, or after a period of preparation. In Chapter V, we consider at much shorter length the possible employment of these forces in limited nuclear or conventional warfare under the threat of escalation.

3. It should be emphasized that, in discussing Soviet theater forces and their capabilities, we do not take account of the actions of opposing Western forces. In particular, we do not assess the

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effect on Soviet theater forces of an initial, strategic nuclear exchange. We believe, however, that the effect of such an exchange could be a principal factor governing the ability of Soviet theater forces to carry out their assigned missions in a general war.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS<sup>1</sup>

A. Soviet military doctrine for general nuclear war stresses the use of all types of forces, and not strategic forces alone, from the outset of hostilities. The requirements for general nuclear war, as the Soviets see them, include forces prepared for action during a relatively brief strategic exchange, and forces suitable for protracted theater warfare involving extensive campaigns. Although this position imposes heavy demands on Soviet resources, it is still being sustained after extensive debate within the political and military leadership. We believe that for at least the next few years the Soviets will continue to regard large theater forces as essential. (*Paras. 1-5*)

B. Soviet doctrine continues to assume the full-scale employment of theater forces from the outset of a general war, with the ultimate objective of annihilating enemy military capabilities and occupying territory. The prospect of nuclear warfare has led to many modifications but no radical revisions in operational doctrine for theater forces. Efforts are being made to adjust organization and training to the requirements of rapid advance and flexible maneuver, to coordinate the employment of tactical nuclear support for Soviet forces, and to ensure destruction of the comparable nuclear means of the enemy. The traditional Soviet concept of combined arms operations has provided a basis for gearing modernized tactical air and missile support to the motorized and armored ground forces. (*Paras. 6-11*)

C. The ground elements of Soviet theater forces, containing nearly two million men and representing the largest part of the total military establishment, are well-trained and equipped with excellent materiel. Present trends point to a continuing emphasis on firepower and mobility. We estimate that there are

<sup>1</sup>The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, dissents from major aspects of this estimate. For his views, see pages 7-10, immediately following the SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.

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about 145 line divisions, approximately 80 of them considered to be combat ready and the remainder at low and cadre strength. The strongest concentrations are in East Germany and in the western and southern border regions of the USSR. If the Soviets were able to mobilize for 30 days before the initiation of hostilities, they could expand their total forces to about 100 combat ready and 125 nonready divisions, although there would be deficiencies in training, equipment, and supporting units. (*Paras. 13-16, 46-49*)

D. Short-range rockets and road mobile missiles with ranges up to 350 nautical miles are now in the artillery support structure of major Soviet theater commands. Tactical Aviation has been sharply reduced in quantity, and a prime current deficiency is the small number of modern aircraft, particularly fighter bombers. However, there have been qualitative improvements in aircraft and their armament, and this trend will continue. In addition, tactical ballistic and antiaircraft missiles are now available, and theater support could also be afforded by MRBMs and IRBMs in western USSR. These developments provide a net increase in the firepower available to support theater forces in the event of general war, but at the expense of some flexibility. (*Paras. 17-21*)

E. Organic air transport is now sufficient to airlift simultaneously only one airborne division or the assault echelons of two such divisions; we believe that this capacity may be doubled in the next several years. Amphibious assault capabilities are extremely limited, and there are no indications of significant future improvements. (*Paras. 29-30, 33-34*)

F. Tactical nuclear support is still limited in quantity and quality, but it has improved markedly over the past few years. Soviet military planners are now in a position to think in terms of committing up to a few hundred nuclear weapons, virtually all with yields in the kiloton range, to a typical *front* operation.<sup>2</sup> Limitations on the quantity and variety of nuclear weapons available to theater forces will have eased by the mid-1960's. The Soviets are probably developing subkiloton weapons, but we have no present evidence of work on delivery systems designed spe-

<sup>2</sup>A *front* is roughly comparable to a Western army group.

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cifically for such weapons. We believe that chemical warfare munitions are available in quantity and would be used extensively in conjunction with nuclear and conventional weapons in general war. (*Paras. 25-27, 45*)

G. Although tactical nuclear delivery systems are integral to Soviet theater forces, the nuclear weapons themselves do not appear to be in their custody. Such weapons are normally stored in depots operated by the Ministry of Defense and located within the USSR. Soviet procedures for controlling these weapons ensure the national leadership that they will not be used without authorization. Existing procedures, together with deficiencies in logistical support, appear to penalize the Soviets in terms of operational readiness and rapid response for tactical nuclear weapons employment. (*Paras. 22-24*)

H. The Soviets probably consider the East European Satellite forces to be a sizable but problematic asset, because of their varying levels of effectiveness and reliability. In the event of war, however, the USSR would probably employ some Satellite forces in combined combat operations, by integrating selected Satellite divisions, corps, or even field armies directly into major Soviet commands. Other Satellite units would be retained under national command for security, reserve, and other functions. (*Paras. 36-37, 41-42*)

I. The principal operations of Soviet theater forces in general war would be directed against NATO in Europe. The Soviets plan to move massive forces rapidly toward the Channel coast in the initial days of such a war. This campaign would probably be augmented by operations in Scandinavia, operations toward the Mediterranean, and operations toward the exits of the Baltic and Black Seas. The Soviet submarine fleet would contribute to the campaign against Western Europe by interdiction operations against the highly important Atlantic supply lines. Other peripheral areas, notably the Far East, apparently have lesser priority for theater force operations. Soviet capabilities to conduct theater force operations against North America are limited to minor airborne and amphibious attacks against Alaska and other Arctic bases. (*Paras. 44, 59*)

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J. Although Soviet theater forces are formidable, especially in the area facing NATO in Europe, they continue to have certain limitations beyond those of tactical nuclear support. In the initial period of a general war, a significant portion of the tactical fighters would need to be assigned to interceptor as well as to ground attack missions. In offensive operations, the highly mechanized group forces are in constant danger of outrunning their logistic support. Finally, existing command and control systems do not permit the Soviets to exercise their traditional strict supervision over subordinates in the widely extended deployment required on the nuclear battlefield. (*Para. 45*)

K. The Soviets currently have 22 line divisions and 1,200 tactical aircraft stationed in East Germany and Poland. In a situation in which surprise or pre-emption were overriding considerations, they could launch an attack against Western Europe without prior buildup. If circumstances permitted, however, the USSR would seek to assemble a considerably larger striking force, primarily of Soviet but probably including some Satellite units. This force could comprise three *fronts* with a total of 50-60 divisions and 2,000 tactical aircraft. We estimate that under non-combat conditions, such a striking force could be built up in East Germany and western Czechoslovakia within 30 days, and a theater reserve could be provided for backup. The ability of these and other Soviet theater forces to carry out their assigned general war campaigns could be governed principally by the effects of the initial nuclear exchange. (*Paras. 53-58*)

L. The adjustments in Soviet theater forces in the past few years have not materially impaired their capabilities to conduct nonnuclear operations. The USSR's highly mechanized forces have favorable characteristics for the dispersed operations required because of the constant possibility of escalation to nuclear warfare. Over the past two years, the nonnuclear firepower of ground units has not been significantly altered, but the supporting nonnuclear firepower which can be delivered by tactical aircraft has decreased. There are indications that the Soviets have recently given recognition to the possibility of nonnuclear war with NATO forces in Europe. They probably intend to retain capabilities for conventional warfare against NATO, but they do not appear to have revised their expectation that any major

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conflict with NATO would be nuclear from the start or would probably escalate. (*Paras. 63-66*)

M. The Soviets have evidently not elaborated any doctrine-- for limited nuclear warfare by theater forces, involving the use of tactical weapons only. We think they would be severely handicapped in any attempts to conduct such warfare at present. Moreover, thus far the Soviets appear to think that limited nuclear conflict in the NATO area would almost certainly escalate to general war. (*Para. 67*)

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