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TRENDS IN THE SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE
AND THEIR POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Note by the Chairman, Working Group of Experts
on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe

Experts representing twelve member countries met on 28th October and completed the attached Report on 31st October, 1968. In the course of their work they paid particular attention to a list of specific questions circulated to them before the meeting, as well as to the assessments in "Political Implications of the Czechoslovakia Crisis" (C-M(68)43(Revised)).

(Signed) William NEWTON

OTAN/NATO,
Brussels, 39.

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TRENDS IN THE SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE
AND THEIR POLICY IMPLICATIONSI. PROSPECTS FOR THE CZECHOSLOVAK SITUATION

1. The USSR, having secured the "legalisation" for an indefinite period of the presence of their forces in Czechoslovakia, will over the coming months attempt to continue the slow process of wearing down Czechoslovak resistance, combining attrition with threats of force, to weaken the unity of the country's leaders in order to obtain its objectives.

2. On the Czechoslovak side, the determination both of the leadership and of public opinion to use their unity as the means of frustrating Soviet pressures to conform is still unbroken. At present there is no clear evidence of a split in the Party leadership but there have been some signs of greater activity by discredited conservatives, no doubt with Soviet encouragement.

3. The Czechoslovak leaders so far have maintained control of the administration and still hope, subject presumably to Soviet pressures on specific measures, to maintain movement towards the federalisation of the State, to guarantee personal freedoms, and to proceed with rehabilitations.

4. Moreover, there is no reason to think that the Russian leaders wish to impede all economic reform which is of such vital importance to the future of the country. In so far as important elements of these reforms could involve a growth of Czechoslovak dependence on the West, they will tend to apply a brake. In any event, the Czechoslovaks are likely to feel the pinch as a result of economic stagnation. The solution of economic problems remains of great importance to the success of any leadership.

5. The bargaining process by which the Russians and the Czechoslovaks have been seeking a modus vivendi since the invasion is likely to continue for some time but the Russians are likely to keep the upper hand.

II. PROSPECTS FOR EVOLUTION IN EASTERN EUROPE

6. Trends toward domestic reform and assertion of independence in home and foreign affairs, evolving in Warsaw Pact countries for over a decade, have been seriously checked by the Soviet decision to intervene in Czechoslovakia. Liberal forces, on the rise in nearly all countries and especially in Czechoslovakia, may have to gear their hopes to the eventual surfacing of less hidebound tendencies in the leadership of the USSR, meanwhile salvaging what they can of their existing policies. It remains to be seen whether pressures for change will in fact be stifled, or whether beneath the surface they will build up again, possibly with even greater force than before.

7. In Rumania, despite the orthodoxy of the internal aspects of government policy, there remain fundamental divergencies between Soviet ambitions within the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Aid (CMEA), and the purely national criteria which govern Rumanian foreign, commercial and defence policy. The Rumanians will probably be responsive to calls for socialist unity, while resisting any institutional restraints on their freedom of action. They are finding it prudent to make concessions rather than isolate themselves completely.

8. In Hungary, Kadar's main preoccupation is to salvage as much as possible of his domestic policies and, of course, his personal position. The government will try therefore to go its own way, especially in the realisation of economic reform; but it will need to proceed cautiously in order to balance the demands of Hungarian public opinion against the requirements of the Soviet Union. It may, as in the past, hope to do this by demonstrating its loyalty on foreign policy questions, while edging towards closer contacts with the West in the commercial and cultural spheres. But the limits within which the leaders can manoeuvre are now more clearly defined.

9. Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia has made clear to Party critics of Gomulka that only a communist leader wholly acceptable to the USSR could hope to replace him in Poland. Consequently, all of Gomulka's reputed Party rivals have overtly endorsed the Soviet decision to intervene in Czechoslovakia and Gomulka's decision that Poland should participate in that intervention. But many people, and especially the intellectuals, were shocked by this forceful violation of the sovereignty of an ally and the result must be a further alienation of the nation from the leadership. In the coming months, the authorities will continue to be mainly concerned with combatting "revisionism". The harsher attitude in domestic matters, of which there have been signs since the events in March, will become more apparent.

10. The participation of Bulgaria in the joint action against Czechoslovakia provided the occasion for a further display of Bulgarian-Russian solidarity. Although there have been some signs of unease in the ranks of the Party, the intelligentsia and the younger generation, over the subservience of Bulgaria to Soviet policy towards Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria will, for the foreseeable future, pursue the advantages received from following the Soviet lead in all things of importance and will eschew innovation, except along lines already well proven by orthodox Parties elsewhere.

III. THE SOVIET OCCUPIED ZONE OF GERMANY

11. Although the intervention in Czechoslovakia did not go down easily with the population, there is no sign of meaningful opposition either to the basic Communist line or to the Ulbricht leadership. For the time being, Ulbricht's heavy hand appears to have been strengthened by the Soviet repression of liberalization in Czechoslovakia.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOVIET POLICY TOWARDS EASTERN EUROPE

12. It is now clearly confirmed that the Soviet leaders put the consolidation of their political, strategic and economic positions in Eastern Europe at the top of their list of foreign policy priorities. In general they are likely to favour more conservative and harder policies. More specifically:

- they have strengthened, at least for some time, the more conservative forces sympathetic to them (Ulbricht, Gomulka, Zhivkov);
- they have indicated to reformers (Dubcek and Kadar) the limits which they must respect;
- they have brought greater pressure to conform on those who follow independent lines (Ccaucescu, Tito, Hodja).

13. The Soviet leaders, however, take account of considerations which impose restrictions on their hard line such as:

- a need to limit as far as possible damage to the international Communist movement;
- care not to prejudice their international image more than they can avoid;
- desire to preserve certain advantages which they obtain from their relations with the West.

14. Moreover, their policy is complicated by national aspirations and the persisting diversity of conditions in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless they seem to be confident that on major issues affecting vital Soviet interests, they can command the support, however reluctant, of their Warsaw Pact partners.

15. The Warsaw Pact. One effect of the invasion of Czechoslovakia has been to boost the concept of joint action, while making it clear to some members that the Pact is a limitation on their independence as much as a guarantee of their security. The USSR certainly wishes to strengthen the Organization still further, and other Warsaw Pact countries, including Rumania, have paid at least lip service to this idea. Measures could include strengthening the command structure. The Russians would undoubtedly like to see Soviet troops stationed in all the Warsaw Pact countries, but this would raise major problems, particularly in view of the categorical opposition of the Rumanians.

16. The Council for Mutual Economic Aid. Likewise, the USSR will also seek to strengthen the cohesion of Eastern Europe through COMECON. While supra-national planning seems improbable, Moscow may now be expected to make every effort not only to reinforce its bilateral economic ties but also to preserve and, if possible, strengthen the multilateral economic bonds. This may take the form of pressure to intensify long-term co-ordination of overall production and investment plans. Moscow will try to apply a selective brake on the development of economic relations between Eastern and Western Europe.

17. The considerations mentioned in paragraph 13 above tend to discourage Soviet military action against non-conforming countries in Eastern Europe, notably Rumania, Albania and Yugoslavia. A further inhibition would be the likelihood of local resistance and a calculation that such resistance might receive external support. Similar considerations are still more likely to apply to any question of intervention in Finland and Austria. There is no sign that Soviet foreign policy has abandoned its traditional and basic feature of avoiding incalculable risks. Nevertheless, despite these considerations tending to inhibit Soviet intervention, a disturbing element of uncertainty must remain.

18. The Soviet leaders are trying to bring Rumania to heel by various strong pressures, including subversion inside the Party. They can already see some results from these but, if such tactics do not work, and especially if the Czechoslovak situation deteriorates, they might be tempted to resort to more drastic measures.

19. For Moscow the Yugoslav example of "liberal Communism" continues to present the most serious source of contamination but the deterrents to military intervention in Yugoslavia are greater than those in the Warsaw Pact countries. Moscow will attempt to exploit inevitable internal difficulties in order to bring Yugoslavia into its sphere of influence; so far Soviet actions have only reinforced the internal cohesion of the country.

V. THE DOCTRINE OF THE "SOCIALIST COMMONWEALTH"

20. The term "socialist commonwealth" is not a new one, having been used by the Russians at least as early as 1955. In the context of the Czechoslovak crisis, three important assertions clearly emerge from the analysis of this doctrine which has recently been put forward by the Soviet Union more explicitly than formerly:

- no link can be allowed to weaken or fall out of the socialist chain;
- the sovereignty of a socialist country is limited; so
- intervention is permissible when Communist principles are being violated, i.e. to protect the Soviet system.

The emphasis on the existence of a sphere of influence was clearly meant as an ideological justification of the Soviet intervention. At the same time, it is intended as a new warning both to the Communist countries and to the West that the Russians will not tolerate any attempt to undermine the cohesion of the socialist commonwealth and will resist any change to their disadvantage in the balance of power.

21. The Russians have deliberately left vague the definition of the extent of the "socialist commonwealth". It is obviously to their advantage to do so. The doctrine clearly applies to those Communist countries with which the USSR considers it has valid treaties of mutual assistance and friendship. It could, however, also be applied to Yugoslavia, Albania, Cuba and even China, but obviously the extent of its application would depend on other specific factors and notably on Soviet power to intervene.

22. This new affirmation of the doctrine leaves no doubt that intervention in whatever they judge to be their sphere of influence will in future be among the Soviet options. But the vagueness of the geographical limits and criteria of application of the doctrine increases the uncertainties of predicting specific Soviet action in individual cases.

VI. INTERNAL SITUATION IN THE USSR

23. The Soviet leadership's handling of the Czechoslovak crisis undoubtedly aggravated strains in the Politburo. There is insufficient evidence for conclusions about the attitude of individual leaders to the invasion of Czechoslovakia. By and large they will probably remain united for some time to come, not because they can feel confident that there will not be internal recriminations over the clumsiness of the political handling, but because any open disagreement would be treated as a sign of weakness and instability.

24. While the mounting campaign for ideological conformity within the USSR has had a good deal of effect, the régime's dramatic employment of force in Czechoslovakia did not inhibit or contain intellectual dissent at home, and may have aggravated it. It provided another stimulus to domestic protest among intellectual minorities in Moscow and other cities of the USSR, the scope of which does not appear as wide as that of last February but is still significant. The usual widespread apathy is tempered by a certain amount of uneasiness.

25. The Soviet leaders will continue to be concerned over the thought of breaches in the facade of total conformity. It seems likely that the already prevailing trend towards more conservative attitudes, and efforts to impose stricter social and cultural discipline, will increase along the lines laid down by Brezhnev last March.

26. The trend towards more conservative attitudes is also winning ground again in the economic field. Application of the cautious and partial reforms adopted in 1965 is continuing in industry but it is now quite clear that the results will not come up to expectations.

27. Although the cost for the Soviet Union of the military operation in Czechoslovakia may not be large, the further economic consequences, particularly in a situation of continuing international instability, may well exacerbate existing Soviet divergences over the allocation of resources.

VII. THE COMMUNIST WORLD

28. The USSR has suffered a new and severe set-back in the world Communist movement, where it aims at re-establishing cohesion under its own guidance and at countering Chinese influence. Moscow's move found a positive echo only among those parties which depend financially upon the Soviet Union or - for instance as a result of their illegal status in the country concerned - have to fight for their mere existence. The criticism voiced by the French and Italian Communist Parties must have come as a painful blow in Moscow. The set-back in some of the international Communist Front Organizations was no less severe.

29. No previous action of the Soviet Union has received so little automatic support from fraternal parties. The invasion has lessened the credibility of the view that the USSR acts for the good of the Communist movement rather than for its great-power interests.

30. In its efforts to overcome the set-back, Moscow may concentrate on rallying the hard core of loyal parties and perhaps encourage and exploit splits in other Communist Parties. It can count on the probability that in the long-run most parties will rally round again, a process which has already begun. Much will depend on the further development of the Czechoslovak situation.

31. The Soviet leaders have not abandoned their plan to hold a World Conference of Communist Parties, as they showed at the meeting of the preparatory committee in Budapest. Although they have obtained some support and a general statement from other parties on the need for such a conference, difficulties will clearly continue over timing and the agenda.

32. The Czechoslovak crisis has added another element to the Sino-Soviet dispute. The Chinese attempted to portray the invasion as confirmation of their thesis of a "revisionist" and expansionist Soviet Union and in their name-calling spoke of "social imperialism" and "Soviet fascism".

33. While obliged to describe the Czechoslovak leaders as revisionist traitors, the Chinese declared their support for the Czechoslovak people. With respect to Rumania, they warned the Soviet Union against action, and this support was very welcome in Bucharest at the time. Propaganda attacks on Yugoslavia were discontinued.

34. This may in part have reflected Chinese concern about the safety of Albania, which concurrently relaxed its hostility towards Yugoslavia and Rumania. The Albanian denunciation of the Warsaw Pact fits into this context, while Peking demonstrated its support by holding talks with the Albanian Minister of Defence in Peking.

35. It is obvious that, to China, this situation has provided a very special opportunity for stimulating the forces in Eastern Europe which can put up resistance to Soviet influence. However, they made no obvious gains of the kind they obtained in 1956.

VIII. THE THIRD WORLD

36. The countries of the Third World have been extremely divided in their reaction to Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia.

37. The Latin American countries and the young African countries - other than Mali - have made no attempt to hide their disapproval. In contrast, certain Asian countries which, with others, have long-established links with the Soviet Union and are largely dependent on its economic and military aid, have adopted a less categorical attitude and Arab countries are very careful not to give offence to Moscow.

38. It would be unreasonable to expect those countries with vested interests in Soviet support to change their public attitude, but in future even they will probably assess Soviet motives more realistically. They may, however, try to exploit possible Soviet sensitivity in order to try to obtain additional military and economic aid.

39. Yugoslavia appears to be particularly disappointed that its non-aligned friends have not all sided with it in taking up the cudgels on behalf of the victim of aggression. The proposal for a conference of non-aligned countries, although not formally abandoned, is not being followed up with any real enthusiasm.

40. Although the Soviet Union has lost a great deal of sympathy, many Third World countries will have been impressed by its power and the determination of Soviet leaders to use it.

41. The Soviet Union will probably not be far wrong if it concludes that there will be no permanent or fundamental change in the Third World's rôle in respect of East/West relations.

IX. IMPLICATIONS FOR EAST/WEST RELATIONS

42. Some consequences of the Czechoslovak crisis are already apparent in a greater rigidity of the Soviet system and some hardening of its policy. While the invasion created widespread and natural alarm and opened up new fields of uncertainty, it has not marked any fundamentally new orientation of Soviet policy towards the West in an aggressive or adventurous sense. The first priority of the Soviet Union remains to consolidate its own economic, military and political strength and the strength of the bloc, while retaining such advantages as it can from normal relations with the West. Some consequences may not yet be discernible, and will depend on whether there are further crises in Eastern Europe; on how far the Soviet leaders solve their problems; and on how they react to whatever policy the West adopts.

43. Even before the Czechoslovak crisis, the Soviet Government had certainly come to adopt over the past twelve months a harder line in domestic and also in some areas of external policy, especially towards the Federal Republic of Germany, although the application of this line has not been consistent. The resort to force in Czechoslovakia provided a demonstration of Soviet military strength but also of Soviet inability to cope with such a situation by political and ideological means. This disproportion between muscle and brain, together with the difficulty of predicting Soviet actions as well as the various steps to increase Soviet world-wide intervention capability, have introduced elements of uncertainty, and even danger, into the international situation.

44. Nevertheless, the evidence available suggests that the Soviet leaders feel obliged to give consideration to the factors mentioned earlier which tend to inhibit aggressive action, and they mean to continue the broad aim of maintaining "co-existence" with the West, and especially with the United States. From the moment of the invasion of Czechoslovakia Moscow has tried to persuade the West to carry on business as usual. Certain of its allies followed suit. The Soviet leaders will probably try to divert attention from their own problems and to continue their policy of "selective détente" towards Western countries, pursuing their familiar aims, including the erosion of the Western community. In doing so they will take even greater care than in the past to ensure that the East/West contacts of their allies are supervised by Moscow. There have already been renewed attacks on the idea of bridge-building between East and West. The Soviet attitude is unpropitious for an agreed solution of the questions of the division of Europe and, primarily, of the unsolved German problem.

45. In the long run, East/West relations will very much depend on how the Soviet leaders choose to solve their many problems. In the shorter term, their intervention poses a delicate problem to the West of how it should emphasize its disapproval in order to prevent miscalculations, and yet not block the way to further evolution and to greater stability in international relationships.