

September 7, 1989

**Special Analysis: USSR: The Option of Force in the
Baltics**

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Summary:

An analysis of the Soviet posture toward the Baltic's movements for greater autonomy.

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Special Analysis

USSR:

The Option of Force in the Baltics

The central party leadership is likely to persist in granting the Baltic republics greater autonomy while warning strongly against secession. President Gorbachev is gambling that a flexible and constructive approach to demands for autonomy eventually will erode secessionist sentiment, enabling him to avoid a show of force that would cripple his reform program and cost him international good will. Moscow ultimately would use force to prevent the secession of a Baltic republic but has a variety of options short of a major military crackdown to deter Baltic nationalists from moves toward secession. Widespread intercommunal violence, not Baltic political posturing, is the most likely trigger for a use of force.

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Moscow is unlikely to abandon its support for far-reaching political and economic reforms in the Baltics that remain within the bounds of *perestroika* and disavow secession. Gorbachev has endorsed the concept of more independent republic party organizations and reportedly has considered a number of innovations, including a scheme for quasi-convertible currencies for foreign transactions. Even the strongly cautionary Central Committee statement of 26 August affirmed plans the Supreme Soviet approved in July to allow the Baltics to implement republic self-financing in January 1990—a year earlier than anywhere else—and to craft more radical plans for republic economic independence. The Central Committee statement criticizing the Baltic independence movement was nonetheless less conciliatory than many of Gorbachev's past comments and indicates there is a Politburo consensus that Baltic demands for independence are extreme.

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No Good Options

The Baltic nationalists responded initially to the Central Committee's statement by postponing action on several controversial proposals but, over the long term, will not yield on their plan to use republic sovereignty within the USSR as a prelude to an eventual push for complete statehood.

3.3(b)(1)
6.2(d)

The Moscow leadership almost certainly views the use of force as a last resort. Gorbachev last December reportedly ruled out using violent measures against Estonian nationalists and has emphasized his desire to do everything possible to avoid using the military. Some leadership elements, such as party Secretaries Chebrikov and Ligachev, probably would turn more quickly than would Gorbachev

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Moscow's Military-Security Options

If Moscow chose to oust Baltic party leaders, it probably would rely on airborne and Interior Ministry (MVD) troops to cordon off government and party buildings and secure airports and other key logistic points. One airborne division—some 5,000 troops—is based in the Baltic Military District, but the Soviets might fly in additional airborne units, as well as elements of the MVD's crack Derzhinsky Division.

3.3(b)(1)

Moscow would probably also augment the approximately 4,500 MVD troops already stationed in the Baltic area. As many as 5,000 additional special police—trained and equipped to control rioting—are less than a day from the Baltics by road or rail. These would probably be used to round up separatist leaders and handle violent demonstrations.

Moscow probably believes that airborne and MVD units—which have infantry fighting vehicles or armored personnel carriers—could deal with all except a full-scale rebellion. In that unlikely event, a dozen or so ground forces battalions from the Baltic MD could also be deployed without mobilizing reservists. A reservist callup in the Baltics would risk further antagonizing the local population, although it could also serve to intimidate nationalist leaders subject to callup.

3.3(b)(1)

Meanwhile, the Soviet Defense Ministry is showing concern about rising hostility toward the armed forces in the Baltics. *Krasnaya zvezda* says the Ministry's chief political officer is meeting with personnel from the Baltic MD to discuss the local situation and the Central Committee's statement.

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Gains Made for Baltic Autonomy in 1989

Pre-WW II national anthems, flags reasserted in all three republics.

Popular-front candidates dominate March elections to the Congress of People's Deputies.

National language laws passed in all three republics.

Citizenship laws proposed in Estonia, Lithuania.

USSR Supreme Soviet approves Baltic economic autonomy bill.

Lithuanian party youth organization (Komsomol) severs ties to Moscow.

Lithuanian party announces fall conference to consider cutting ties to CPSU.

Congress of People's Deputies reportedly finds annexation of Baltic republics illegal.

Potential Flashpoints

Outside agitation by reactionary Russian nationalist groups.

Extremists gain control of Popular Fronts.

Baltic parties split along ethnic lines.

Moscow leadership in open conflict over nationality policy.

Pronationalist Baltic party leaders fired.

Nationalist, "parallel" government formed, declares secession.

Widespread intercommunal violence erupts; MVD cannot control.

Soviet troops deployed; martial law declared.

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from political means to the use of force, but in the end the entire leadership would agree on the necessity of military action if all other means failed to prevent secession. [redacted]

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The leadership would first exhaust less drastic means. For example, Gorbachev could deprive activists of important advocates in Moscow by removing nationalist-minded officials, such as Lithuanian party chief Brazauskas or Estonian premier Toom. Or, central ministries could be directed to exert economic pressure by delaying the delivery of fuel or blocking foreign financial ventures. Alternatively, Moscow might emphasize its disapproval by increasing the presence and visibility of security (MVD and KGB) personnel or military units in the Baltics, hoping to cow dissenters and forestall a major bloodletting. In April the appearance of a few armored personnel carriers in Riga during a routine military command staff exercise reportedly discomfited Latvian nationalists. [redacted]

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Moscow recognizes that these options carry the risk of provoking demonstrations and escalating into a situation ultimately trapping the central leadership into sending troops. The risk is less, however, than that associated with a general crackdown in the Baltic republics, which would be held in reserve as a last resort. A crackdown could force Gorbachev to retreat on the decentralizing aspects of his domestic reform program and sharpen nationality problems elsewhere in the country. It would also cost him much of the international good will derived from his diplomatic initiatives.

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Outlook

The political atmosphere between the Baltic capitals and Moscow will remain tense over the next few months as local parties try to maintain their credibility in the face of continued work by the popular fronts to press their action programs for independence. Critical points could occur this fall with republic-level elections in Estonia and Latvia or next spring when the fronts in both these republics plan to hold popular congresses that will consider declaring independence. *Sajudis* candidates in Lithuania are likely to win control of the republic legislature then. [redacted]

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As long as Moscow continues its present course, republic party organizations have a chance of persuading nationalists not to provoke Moscow with calls for secession. The greatest threat to Moscow's policy of accommodation comes from the Russian minorities, who are much more likely than the Balts to attempt to provoke a violent confrontation. If widespread intercommunal violence then resulted, Moscow would declare martial law and use troops to restore order.

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