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# SOVIET AIRBORNE FORCES AND PREEMPTIVE POWER PROJECTION

by

KENNETH ALLARD

The decade of the Eighties has begun with the Western World, in some disarray, contemplating the implications of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. For the first time since World War II, regular Soviet tactical formations have been deployed and committed to combat outside a bloc country. In the process, the Soviets have revealed a new capability to deploy large numbers of forces across distances and within time spans previously thought unattainable. The military correspondent of *The New York Times*, Drew Middleton, put the point succinctly:

The primary lesson for the United States and its allies in the Soviet Union's swift airborne movement into Afghanistan is that the Russians have the ability to move significant numbers of troops in a relatively short time into situations they consider critical to their policies.<sup>1</sup>

Coming at a time when the Iranian hostage crisis has provided harsh lessons in the realities of geopolitics and the limitations of US power projection, the Soviet capability must be seen as a worrisome counterpoint.

Like most developments of this sort, the truth is that there has been no sudden expansion of Soviet airlift capabilities. Rather, progress has been incremental, sustained, and largely unaccompanied by the dramatic notice which attends the launching of an aircraft carrier or the testing of a new

strategic missile. Not surprisingly, most students of Soviet military affairs have concentrated their attention in other areas when considering the projection of power. The expansion of Soviet naval capabilities under Admiral Gorshkov has monopolized most of this attention, with a substantial body of literature now having emerged centering on the coercive properties of "Soviet naval diplomacy." Airlift and airborne capabilities have generally been treated almost as an afterthought in this literature, usually under the category of "other interventionary forces."

These "other forces" have received more attention from those strategic planners who have recognized the importance attached by the Soviets to the use of airborne assaults in support of conventional ground operations. Despite the risks associated with such operations on the modern battlefield, Soviet tactics continue to emphasize the use of airborne assaults, or *desants*, against both tactical and strategic objectives in coordination with blitzkrieg attacks by large formations of regular ground forces. The modernization of Soviet airborne forces over the last decade reflects the primacy of these conventional missions; however, it has also prepared the airborne troops to perform as a capable intervention force at a considerable distance from Russian or Warsaw Pact territory. It is this capability of the airborne troops—the *Vozdushno-Desantnyye Voyska* or VDV—which should cause Western

analysts to adjust their conceptions of the nature, quality, and extent of Soviet "strategic reach" in the 1980's.

This article will focus first on the historical development and current operational possibilities of Soviet airborne forces, with particular reference to the Afghanistan experience. Subsequently, it will address the implications for Soviet foreign policy choices and preemptive power projection.

## HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

After World War I, both the Red Army and what was left of the German General Staff embraced the "revolutionary" concept of airborne warfare. Indeed, the Red Army conducted one of history's first airborne assaults in Soviet Central Asia during campaigns against rebellious Islamic tribesmen in the 1920's. Progress was made throughout the 1930's under the sponsorship of Marshal Tukhachevskiy, but the gains of the pre-war era were wiped out in the first hours of Operation Barbarossa in 1941 when Hitler invaded Russia. The Germans, in addition to their other early successes, managed to destroy virtually all of the Red Army's transport aircraft, and Soviet airborne operations were consequently limited to short-range assaults for the rest of the war. Although postwar Soviet airborne forces were reorganized into three corps (comprising 100,000 men) and placed in a separate directorate under the Ministry of Defense, they continued to be limited in effectiveness by inadequate air transport capabilities. They were entirely capable of mounting the battalion-sized tactical *desants* called for by Soviet military doctrine, principally to achieve surprise and shock effect in attacks against enemy rear-area targets, but they were certainly incapable of executing a major power projection mission.

These limitations did not prevent Nikita Khrushchev from engaging in some strategic braggadocio in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis in 1956. His after-the-fact intimations that large numbers of Soviet airborne "volunteers" stood ready for deployment to the Middle East in support of the Arab cause

made for some interesting speculation. Most Western military experts were not impressed by any apparent Russian capability, but, for the first time, a potential power projection mission for the Soviet airborne forces received public attention.

The year 1956 was also marked by the maiden flight of the Antonov-12 transport plane, similar to the US C-130 Hercules; the AN-12 entered service three years later. Its payload of 44,090 pounds and range of 2236 miles gave the Soviet transport air force for the first time a respectable mid-range cargo aircraft, one which quickly became the premier machine for transporting paratroops. The Soviets made additional strides in equipment development in the 1960's, providing their airborne troops with tactical transport vehicles, light artillery, mortars, and self-propelled antitank guns such as the ASU-57.<sup>2</sup>

These new capabilities were much in evidence when Soviet airborne forces spearheaded the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Under the cover of MIG-17 jet fighters, Soviet air transports landed at the Prague airport in the first minutes of the operation. After linking up with elements of the KGB, the Soviet secret police forces already in place, the airborne troops fanned out from the airport to seize key objectives within the Czech capital: government buildings, communications centers, and power plants. At the same time, other airborne troops were landed in coordinated assaults which allowed the Soviets to take control of two other major airfields in the area. They were thus able to begin a massive airlift of supplies and equipment through these airheads, a factor that became even more important as the logistic and communications services of the regular Soviet ground forces fell into some disarray. Indeed, the efficiency of the airlift was credited with having prevented a logistical debacle when the ground forces outdistanced their supply trains. Despite the fact that their landings were unopposed, the airborne forces were credited with a performance in the Czech invasion that was well-executed and conspicuously successful.<sup>3</sup>

By the early 1970's, the evolution of the

Soviet airborne forces had given a new credibility to the previously nascent ability of the USSR to project power. The transport air force, the *Voyenno-Transportnaya Aviatsiya* or VTA, had expanded its inventory of Antonov-12 transports to over 700 and was also beginning to acquire the latest in the Antonov transport series, the AN-22. A huge turbo-prop aircraft, the AN-22 is a strategic transport with a payload of 88 tons and an unrefueled range of more than 3000 miles. During the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, the new Soviet airlift capabilities were critical in assisting the rapid resupply of both Egypt and Syria and in underwriting the apparent alert of the Soviet airborne forces for an interventionist role in the conflict. The Soviet threat to intervene, contained in Brezhnev's note to President Nixon on October 24th, and their undeniable ability to carry out that threat, loomed large in Western calculations and triggered a worldwide alert of US military forces. That the superpower confrontation over this issue eventually resulted in the virtual imposition of a cease-fire on their respective client states without actual intervention should in no way detract from an appreciation of the potency of the Kremlin's new force. As Graham Turbiville notes, "The seven Soviet airborne divisions served the USSR well by remaining on alert in the Soviet Union. The threat of their use was probably as effective a means of promoting Soviet aims as their actual movement to Egypt or Syria."<sup>4</sup>

In 1973, the Soviets fielded a new fighting vehicle, the *Boevaia Mashina Desantnaya* or BMD, an amphibious light tank specifically designed for the airborne mission. Although armored vehicles such as the ASU-57 had long been a part of the airborne inventory, the BMD substantially increased the tactical firepower and mobility of the Soviet airborne division. It is equipped with the Sagger antitank missile launcher and a 73mm main gun (comparable to the US Sherman tank with its 76mm gun), and thus can engage armored targets at ranges of up to 3000 meters. The BMD also mounts two machine guns and can carry, in addition to its five-man crew, up to six paratroopers, who

are able to engage targets through firing ports while the vehicle is buttoned up and on the move. The BMD can reach speeds of at least 40 mph overland and 6 mph in water. Its effectiveness is not just a function of its speed and armament, however: weighing just under nine tons combat-loaded, it can easily be airlifted in significant quantities by both tactical and strategic transports. The entire divisional complement of 107 BMDs, for example, can be airlifted in just 27 sorties of the AN-22 fleet.

The BMD answers two problems of airborne employment: the limited mobility of the airborne infantry, once landed, and the vulnerability of such troops to larger, better-armed reaction forces. With the BMD, Soviet paratroopers can land and deploy in remote, secure locations and then proceed rapidly to their objectives in more heavily defended areas. Their ability to engage opposing armored forces and all but the most heavily fortified positions means that the paratroopers would have reasonable

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prospects for success in most power projection scenarios. The BMD will not, of course, be so effective if an opponent is able to organize coherent anti-armor defenses, particularly if those defenses are built around modern tanks. Impressive as it may be, the BMD is still a light armored vehicle and not likely to do well in head-to-head engagements against, say, the Chieftain, the Leopard, or M-60 series tanks. Fortunately for the Soviets, sophisticated arrangements for combatting armor threats are not characteristic of many of the areas in which the airborne forces might conceivably be employed in a power projection mission.

Since the introduction of the BMD, the Soviets have made a number of adjustments in the force structure of the airborne division and in its combat support capabilities. A BMD regiment replaced one of the three traditional parachute regiments in each operational airborne division. Supply and service activities were consolidated in a single battalion, as were the previously separate functions of motor maintenance and transport. Meanwhile, the VTA continued to keep pace. Yet another in the series of strategic cargo aircraft was developed to meet the additional lift requirements occasioned by the added weight of the BMD. Closely resembling the US C-141 Starlifter, the new Ilyushin-76 is a four-engine jet transport with a payload of 44 tons. It can transport three BMDs or 120 fully equipped paratroopers to a range of 3000 miles without refueling. Two of its most notable features are a short take-off and landing capability from primitive airstrips and large rear doors that apparently permit in-flight drops of troops and equipment.<sup>5</sup> Steady manufacture of the IL-76 has brought the aircraft to a prominent place in the VTA inventory, and no end to the production run is in sight. By 1979, approximately 100 of the aircraft were on hand, and production was estimated to be three per month.<sup>6</sup>

#### **CURRENT CAPABILITIES AND OPERATIONS**

The Soviets are now thought to have

eight operational airborne divisions, although there is some debate over whether one of the divisions is a training base or a special-purpose command. Five of the eight divisions are located in the western military districts of the Soviet Union, two are stationed in the central Asian republics, and one is believed to be assigned to the Far East. Each airborne division comprises nearly 8500 men, including artillery and combat support elements, and is organized in the familiar triangular pattern of Soviet tactical formations (three combat regiments of three battalions each, etc.). In addition, each division commander enjoys comprehensive combat support organized within the division structure. While the various combat support units may not always be deployed *in toto*, their existence within the divisional structure allows considerable flexibility in tailoring support requirements to specific missions. Probably the most striking feature of the division, however, is the extent to which it embodies the concepts of all-around defense and comprehensive firepower. A division equipment list shows that antitank and antiaircraft defenses have been stressed as much within airborne units as they have within other elements of the Soviet ground forces. The paratroopers were also among the first Soviet forces to be equipped with the new AKS-74 assault rifle, a weapon which has attracted some interest from Western observers since its combat baptism in Afghanistan.

The selection and training of the airborne troops are as impressive as their equipment. The airborne recruit is likely to have received a good deal of preinduction military training through his local DOSAAF<sup>7</sup> organization and to have gained high marks for physical fitness, initiative, and political reliability. Individual airborne training is rigorous and highly specialized, incorporating a degree of personal attention which is rare in the Soviet military. Unit training, even when taken in conjunction with regular ground forces, stresses independent, protracted operations, usually under varying terrain and climatic conditions. An important part of the organizational routine is directed

toward insuring that an unusually high degree of political motivation remains characteristic of all airborne units. It is the high level of such motivation which makes the airborne forces a particularly suitable weapon for use in political warfare, one which can, moreover, go hand-in-glove with the sub-rosa arts of infiltration and subversion practiced by the KGB. The airborne forces are thus equipped and trained to perform in either conventional wartime missions or as a part of more limited scenarios.

The ability of the VTA to support the airborne forces has never been greater. Military transport is, in a sense, the arm that swings the fist, and the VTA has had the benefit of consistent attention of Soviet planners to the creation of a balanced system of air transport, fully capable of operating at both tactical and strategic ranges. The VTA also enjoys augmentation as required from the Soviet airline Aeroflot, whose developments in air transport aircraft have paralleled those of the VTA. The following table shows the aircraft currently estimated to be in service with VTA and Aeroflot.

	<u>AN-12</u>	<u>IL-76</u>	<u>AN-22</u>
VTA	600	100	50
Aeroflot	150	25	36
	<u>750</u>	<u>125</u>	<u>86</u>

Large though it is, this fleet may be augmented in the near future with a follow-on transport to the AN-22, a super-heavy-lift transport known as the AN-40, whose performance characteristics will probably exceed those of the US Air Force C-5A Galaxy.

It is not possible to gauge the power projection ability of this fleet with absolute precision, given the imponderables of scenario, mission, tactical situation, and combat support forces—to say nothing of the logistics involved in any operation beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. Equally problematic for any analytical effort is the question of how Soviet airborne commanders might configure their force loading to compensate for the additional weight of the BMD. Still, it is possible to compare probable

lift requirements against known lift capacity to get a rough idea of how an airborne force could be transported and supplied. In the table on the following page, the total transports needed to project the assault elements of three airborne divisions (three BMD regiments and six parachute regiments) are calculated based on passenger and cargo capacities of the aircraft. It is interesting that an initial assault force this large—comprising 17,000 troops and more than 300 BMDs—could be projected *in a single sortie* by each of the 256 transports, a figure which involves less than 30 percent of the combined VTA and Aeroflot air fleet (a sortie is one operational flight by one aircraft). If the same 256 transports are also used to ferry the equipment and supplies for the three divisions, the total number of sorties is less than a thousand and, more significantly, the extremely low number of average sorties per aircraft would present few problems to VTA lift planners and aircraft crews.<sup>8</sup> Without refueling en route, and assuming airlanding rather than airdropping, the distance to which such a force could be projected is limited principally by the 2000-mile range of the AN-12; a two-division force using only the AN-22 and IL-76 fleets could theoretically operate at any point within the 3000-mile range of these aircraft. The significance of these operating ranges becomes apparent when we consider, for example, that the Soviet cities of Tbilisi and Tashkent, from which airborne operations might be staged, are only 560 and 1050 miles from Tehran, respectively. Tbilisi is 600 miles from the major Iranian oilfields and refineries near Abadan, 860 miles from Iran's huge tanker terminal at Kharg Island, and 1100 miles from the Strait of Hormuz.

There are, certainly, constraints which would limit this kind of power projection; however, the relevant constraints do not include any lack of availability of transport aircraft—a fact which must make American defense analysts envious. The perennial problem of sustained logistical support would not impose an intolerable burden on VTA assets as long as the AN-12 could be used. Other limiting factors, however, would be

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## REQUIRED AIRLIFT—ASSAULT ELEMENTS OF 3 AIRBORNE DIVISIONS

	<u>Required Sorties</u>
<b>Initial Assault Force:</b>	
Assault elements of three airborne divisions: six parachute regiments and three BMD regiments with vehicles.	AN-12: 135 IL-76: 79 AN-22: 42*
<b>Assault Force Equipment:</b>	
Artillery, antitank, and antiaircraft weapons for three-division assault force (2778 short tons**)	AN-12: 15 IL-76: 30 AN-22: 78
<b>Logistics:</b>	
Basic supply essentials to support assault force (principally food, ammunition, and fuel) under conditions of logistical austerity. Estimated total of 10,178 short tons and 300,000 gallons. The figure for fuels is that needed weekly.	AN-12: 516 IL-76: 9

<b>Total Requirements:</b>	<u>Sorties</u>	<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>Average Sorties/Aircraft</u>
	AN-12: 666	AN-12: 135	AN-12: 4.93
	IL-76: 118	IL-76: 79	IL-76: 1.49
	AN-22: 120	AN-22: 42	AN-22: 2.86
	904	256	

\*The figures of 135, 79, and 42 (totaling 256) are based on the total aircraft required to project the initial assault force in a single sortie—eliminating the necessity for repetitive ferrying. The figure of 256, for analytical clarity, is then held constant to highlight the VTA's ability to provide the assault force with follow-on logistical support until other sources of supply are secured.

\*\*Short tonnage shown includes an allowance for the SA-4 surface-to-air missile, although it would probably not be deployed in the absence of an acute air threat.

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present. One is that the mounting of 1000 sorties requires extensive airport facilities on both ends of these flights. And, if the round-trip distance to the target area is more than the range of the transports, then either the availability of aviation fuel on landing or the ability to refuel on the return leg would be vital. Despite Soviet claims that entire divisions can be airdropped within minutes, they appreciate the value of air-landing, a practice which is more efficient but which greatly extends the time required to offload supplies and turn the aircraft around for its return flight. Under these conditions the size of the airport facility is critical, since immediate storage and marshaling areas are necessary to prevent aircraft from being "stacked up" with no place to go. In short, the size of the airhead, fuel availability, and the efficiency with which incoming flights can

be controlled, landed, unloaded, and sent off are factors which affect not only the mission but also the size and composition of an airborne force.

Any power projection scenario becomes more complicated if it involves the possibility of combat, and particularly so if it calls for an airborne movement. Air superiority—or at least air neutrality—is a critical concern both in the air corridors en route to the objective and over the landing zones. The large, lumbering transports are highly vulnerable to interceptor aircraft or, at lower altitudes, to well-directed ground fire. When tactical fighter escorts are required, not only do the fighters complicate the operational and coordinative aspects of the mission, but their more pronounced range limitations might also inhibit distant interventions. This is not to say, however, that the problem of

providing tactical air cover at extended ranges is an insoluble one for the Soviets: in-flight refueling, prepositioning of fuel stocks and aircraft, and even the "borrowing" of regional surrogate air forces are among the possible options. Secrecy, deception, and surprise—the traditional attendants of airborne tactics—can also play an important role in obviating close air support. A classic example, though limited in scope, was the Entebbe raid. Stealth was a key in effecting an unimpeded approach and landing, following which one of the priorities of the raiders was to disable or destroy the MIG fighters of the Ugandan Air Force parked nearby.

While the USSR has an undeniable capability to place large numbers of airborne forces in distant places, the experience of the Soviet airborne troops sent to Afghanistan in December 1979 suggests that significant results can be obtained with a much smaller force. The first Russian combat force to enter Afghanistan appears to have been a BMD regiment which was airlanded at Bagram airbase, north of Kabul, in early December. It was then moved to the guerrilla-controlled area of the Salang Pass on the 20th to secure the highway between the Afghan capital and the Soviet border. On Christmas Eve, the Soviets began an airlift that averaged six flights per hour during daylight hours for the next three days, eventually airlanding 5000 airborne troops.<sup>9</sup> That figure approximates the total assault forces for an airborne division deployed with its BMD regiment, and the number of BMDs subsequently seen in the streets of Kabul tends to confirm the estimate of a division.

At about 1900 hours on the evening of 26 December, the Soviet paratroopers struck at the telecommunications center, key government buildings, and the presidential residence. The force which surrounded President Hafizullah Amin's palace was, according to *The Washington Post*, "spearheaded by light tanks [BMDs] that had been airlifted in [and] was composed of no more than two or three battalions."<sup>10</sup> Most probably this was the division's BMD regiment which, together with the two

parachute regiments, performed with speed and precision. By the next morning, Kabul was calm and the airlift began again. Meanwhile, Soviet motorized rifle and armored forces had crossed the border during the night and were now on the way to their assigned positions inside Afghanistan.

The airborne forces clearly enjoyed great advantages in the political control and deception which enabled them to land unopposed in Kabul and facilitated their movement to key targets. However, it should be remembered that the paratroopers were, for the most part, in combat for the first time and that they had to orient themselves quickly after their deployment and carry out a sophisticated military operation with clockwork timing. Their performance suggests that the Soviets' selectivity and training have produced the desired result and must, in Soviet eyes, fully justify the time and money spent on airborne force development. Similarly, the VTA comes in for a certain amount of credit for its part in the operation, although the proximity of the Soviet border allowed the employment of both tactical and strategic transports, and complete control of the airfields in Kabul enabled the air corridors to be used with maximum efficiency. With these advantages, it is hard to repress the notion that most commercial airlines might have done as well, but there is no question that the VTA gained greatly from the experience of projecting a large airborne force some 2300 miles from its embarkation areas and then efficiently providing it logistical support.

#### PREEMPTIVE POWER PROJECTION

This article thus far has centered on the capabilities of the Soviet airborne forces. The more difficult problem, of course, is not to determine capability, but to determine intent. To see the most likely situations which would stimulate a direct Soviet involvement with the possibility of an airborne employment, one must look at the larger dimensions of Soviet foreign policy objectives. Obviously the Soviets do not take the commitment of their airborne forces lightly, and they have not



employed them in every conceivable instance when they might have been used to some advantage. Moreover, the airborne forces have never been employed alone; true to established Soviet tactical doctrine, they have always been part of a much larger intervention by elements of the regular ground forces. In both Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, that intervention was clearly a major foreign policy adventure which employed the military arm as the executor of "policy by other means."

Even with the great strides made in the general development of Soviet military power over the last decade, there is little reason to believe that the relationship between a supportive Soviet military and a dominant Soviet foreign policy will be reversed—that the tail will come to wag the dog. However, it is another question to ask whether a relative asymmetry in the abilities of the United States and the Soviet Union to project power might increase Russian willingness to engage in bold adventures on the basis of a competitive edge. If one considers the area of the Eurasian landmass and its adjacent territories, nowhere is this asymmetry—or "window of opportunity"—greater than in the area of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Nowhere else are Western interests so critically engaged but so poorly defended, and in few other areas are the geopolitical trends running so clearly in Moscow's favor. Of course, the Soviets have spared no effort in denying that their actions in Afghanistan are a prelude to later moves against the oilfields, or that they are part of a grand strategic design to establish hegemony over the region. And many Western observers, while not accepting these assertions at face value, remain skeptical that the Soviets would deliberately follow a course of action which would almost certainly bring about a direct confrontation with the United States and the attendant risk of nuclear war.

With the possibility of regional involvement by Western military forces in response to an actual or perceived threat to oil supplies, the current situation presents an interesting problem for those Kremlin planners who weave Soviet foreign policy. In

many of the countries throughout the Persian Gulf area, the USSR is presented with opportunities for national aggrandizement tied to what is still an important policy motive for the Soviet leadership: support for wars of national liberation. While the Soviets can exploit internal unrest in a number of local countries through manipulation and subversion by the KGB and irregular forces, there is doubt as to how far their reliance on a strategy of indirection and the use of surrogates can take them. For example, if, as Edward Luttwak suggested recently, a Cuban-Yemeni armored force were to launch a decisive struggle to bring down the Sultan of Muscat-Oman and seize control of the land area overlooking the Strait of Hormuz, how can the Soviets be sure that this action might not provoke US intervention?<sup>11</sup> If such an intervention were seriously contemplable by the United States—and a conventional Leninist analysis would suggest that it might be—would there be any way to halt a potential US-Soviet confrontation which could lead to a nuclear exchange?

One way to preclude either eventuality would be for the Soviets to follow what can be called a strategy of preemptive power projection, a concept which calls to mind Nathan Bedford Forrest's axiom about "getting there firstest with the mostest." In this case, the idea of "firstest" is the more important concept, since the objective is to force the other power to either retreat entirely or choose a face-to-face tactical engagement that carries a risk of escalation. The key requirement in such a strategy is to project a credible combat force into a disputed area with sufficient speed and surprise as to present the opposing superpower with a *fait accompli*.<sup>12</sup> In an important respect, the strategic aims of this form of power projection are not limited simply to military seizure of a key city or geographic feature. Even more damaging may be the paralytic effect of such a swiftly executed preemptive deployment on the decisionmaking apparatus of the opposing superpower. The latter, confronted by a modern-day version of Scylla and Charybdis, may be left with no alternative but diplomatic protest. An

analogous situation is common enough in chess: should the queen's bishop make a long diagonal strike to seize an exposed piece and place the opposing king in check, the king must then be moved from danger, even if it means sacrificing a valuable but lesser piece.

From the Soviet viewpoint, one of the more agreeable features of such a strategy is that it can be combined with a variety of face-saving measures which, however transparent to the rest of the world, would provide an important ideological cloak of legitimacy. In Afghanistan, for example, the Soviets have repeatedly claimed that they were invited in by the legitimate government to help oppose subversion from without. It requires no great imagination to envision similar circumstances in other countries throughout the region of the Middle East and Persian Gulf: a Soviet-inspired internal uprising results in the formation of a "provisional revolutionary government" which, before consolidating power or even while still engaged in combatting local security forces, broadcasts an appeal for Soviet assistance. Under the cover of such a request, Soviet airborne troops would be the most logical force to be employed. Their transports are capable of reaching any country in the region in a matter of hours; their combat potential renders them capable of providing a decisive edge in most tactical situations; and their political motivation and training make them highly suitable for such a role. Most important, however, the speed of such an airborne employment would present the Western world with an untimely lesson in preemptive power projection. Soviet forces would be in place, and it would then be the West's turn to cross a border. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to envision any Western response other than troubled acquiescence.

The Soviet airborne forces are thus quite capable of becoming the gendarmes of a new Russian imperialism, should Soviet foreign policy turn out to be as expansionist in fact as it now appears to be in the minds of many Western analysts. Strictly speaking, their use as elements of preemptive power projection would represent an expansion of the airborne mission beyond what has been seen to date,

requiring the solution of problems which are substantial but hardly insoluble. The absence of an early link-up with regular Soviet ground forces, for example, might be offset either by the expansion of an airhead to accommodate the air-landing of larger conventional formations, or even by the presence of indigenous guerrilla forces, which could augment the airborne forces with decisive effect. And as the Soviet Navy acquires more carrier-centered battle groups and builds its fleet air arm, the problem of providing tactical air cover for more distant intervention missions will become less of an obstacle than it now appears to be.

**I**t is vital that strategic planners and intelligence analysts of Western military establishments appreciate the new Soviet airborne capability and recognize the possibilities that it presents to those who make Soviet foreign policy. In a matter of a few hours, Soviet leaders are now able to project large numbers of these elite troops to a point thousands of miles from Soviet or Warsaw Pact territory, should they decide to do so. That stark fact should reshape our concept of the nature of the Soviet strategic reach in the 1980's. One would hope as well that it will spur some creative thought by Western defense analysts on how best to prevent the new airborne potential from being translated into the *fait accompli* of a preemptive Soviet stroke.

#### NOTES

1. Drew Middleton, "Soviet Display of Flexibility," *The New York Times*, 28 December 1979, p. 1.
2. Graham H. Turbiville, "Soviet Airborne Troops," in *Soviet Naval Influence*, ed. Michael McGwire and John McDonnell (New York: Praeger, 1977), p. 280.
3. Leo Heiman, "Soviet Invasion Weaknesses," *Military Review*, 69 (August 1969), 38-45. See also Philip A. Karber, "Czechoslovakia: A Scenario of the Future?" *Military Review*, 69 (February 1969), 11-21.
4. Turbiville, p. 288.
5. Peter Borgart, "The Soviet Transport Air Force," *International Defense Review*, 12 (July 1979), 945.
6. This figure, though not held by all sources, is cited persuasively by Borgart. Production of the IL-76 and other VTA aircraft is also discussed in an excellent article by William Schneider Jr., "Soviet Military Airlift: Key to Rapid Power Projection," *Air Force Magazine*, 63 (March 1980), 80-87. For a comment on the quality of the IL-76, see Deborah M. Kyle, "Russia's IL-76 Transport: Ten Years Ahead of C-X?" *Armed Forces Journal*, 117 (July 1980), 18-19.

7. The DOSAAF is a paramilitary organization set up in the Soviet Union in 1951 to provide pre-induction military training for draft-age Soviet men. The acronym is usually translated as the "Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Air Force, and Navy." See US Department of the Army, *Handbook on the Soviet Ground Forces*, Field Manual 30-40 (Washington: GPO, 1975), pp. 3-11.

8. Space limitations do not permit here a full treatment of the data which formed the basis for this estimate. For a complete discussion of these figures, see pp. 13-27 of my paper, "A Clear and Present Danger: Soviet Airborne Forces in the 1980's," presented to the Ninth Annual Conference of the International Security Studies Program, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 23-25 April 1980.

9. Don Oberdorfer, "Soviet Invasion Propels Afghanistan into Center of World's Attention," *Boston Globe*, 3 January 1980, p. 10.

10. William Branigin, "Soviet Kabul Coup Carefully Staged," *The Washington Post*, 7 January 1980, p. A16.

11. Edward N. Luttwak, "Cubans in Arabia?" *Commentary*, 68 (December 1979), 62-66.

12. Thomas C. Schelling raised a similar point in describing as a "preemptive maneuver" the 1958 landing of US Marines in Lebanon as a signal of the seriousness of American intentions: "It is harder to retreat than not to land in the first place; the landing helped put the next step up to the Russians." Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), p. 49.

