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Authority: 969000  
By: MPT/KARA Date: 1/10/00

Pol Chicom - USSR

Department of State

TELEGRAM



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ACTION SS 70

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FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3945

SECRET MOSCOW 4709

LIMDIS

SUBJ: QUESTION OF SOVIET BELLIGERENT MOVES AGAINST CHINA.

1. CLOSE ATTENTION WHICH IS NATURALLY BEING DEVOTED HERE TO THE POSSIBILITY OF SOVIET MILITARY ACTION AGAINST CHINA HAS BEEN STIMULATED BY SPECULATION REGARDING A PREEMPTIVE STRIKE PUBLISHED LATELY IN THE US PRESS. OUR NATO COLLEAGUES AND THE PRES IN MOSCOW HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO CONFIRMATION LOCALLY OR FROM THEIR FOREIGN MINISTRIES REGARDING RUMOR SOVIETS MAY HAVE SOUNDED OUT SOME OF THEIR ALLIES REGARDING ACCEPTABILITY SUCH AN ATTACK.

2. WE HAVE NOTED INTERESTING NUANCES IN INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO US DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY FROM SOVIET SOURCES. AS ALREADY REPORTED, STATEMENTS REACHING US FROM SOVIET FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIALS

DECRY AND REJECT ANY INTENTION OF PREEMPTIVE MILITARY ACTION, ALTHOUGH THEY SEEM TO RESERVE AN OPTION FOR THE SOVIETS TO HIT BACK STRONGLY IN THE CASE OF FURTHER INCIDENTS OR PROVOCATIONS. THE LINE IS THAT A WARLIKE ACT IS AS UNTHINKABLE AS IT IS UNNECESSARY, GIVEN THE DISPARITY IN RELATIVE MILITARY POWER. PRIVATELY SOVIET OFFICIALS EXPRESS BEWILDERMENT ABOUT CHINA'S POLICIES TOWARD THE USSR.

3. RECENT STRONG PRESS ARTICLES, ALSO REPORTED, AS WELL AS INFORMAL REMARKS OF SOVIET COMMENTATORS AND PUBLIC LECTURERS, ARE MORE AMBIGUOUS. THEY HAVE BEEN CONSCIOUSLY SHARPER IN PRESENTING MAOISTS AS A UNIVERSAL THREAT AND CONSISTENTLY ANTI-SOVIET. THEY HAVE BEEN PERHAPS SIGNIFICANTLY MORE BELLICOSE IN EVOKING THE EXAMPLE OF THE CRUSHING RESPONSE DELIVERED BY THE SOVIETS AND MONGOLS TO JAPANESE PROVOCATIONS ON THE BORDER IN 1939 AND 1945.

Handwritten notes: 4709, 69-4-69, and a vertical signature.

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OBVIOUSLY MEANT AS A WARNING, THESE STATEMENTS MAY LEAD ONE TO BELIEVE THAT PERHAPS THE SOVIETS ARE NOT TOO UNHAPPY ABOUT SPECULATION CONCERNING SOVIET FUTURE MOVES.

4. PUBLIC PROMISES OF A RESOLUTE REBUFF TO THE CHINESE ARE BOUND TO FIND READY SUPPORT AMONG THE SOVIET POPULACE. WHILE WE BELIEVE THERE IS POPULAR CONCERN HERE ABOUT HOW RELATIONS WITH CHINA WILL DEVELOP AND CERTAINLY PROFOUND HOPE THAT NO WAR WILL OCCUR,

THERE IS ALSO THE FEELING THAT IF THE CHINESE RESORT TO VIOLENCE, THEY SHOULD BE PROPERLY PUNISHED. IN TALKING ABOUT THE DANGER OF WAR, THE REGIME THUS FAR HAS TAKEN A SOBER LINE, BUT ONE THAT AVOIDS ANY ELEMENT OF IMMEDIACY. THE PRESS AND TELEVISION HAVE KEPT ALIVE CRITICISM OF MAO, BUT THE DANGER OF WESTERN IMPERIALISM HAS BEEN THE MORE CONSISTENT SCHEME. SIMILARLY, THE REGIME HAS HELD BACK FROM STAGING POPULAR DEMONSTRATIONS OR COUNTRY-WIDE PROTEST MEETINGS FOLLOWING THE MORE RECENT BORDER CLASHES. ALTHOUGH THE SOVIETS COULD WELL LAUNCH A MAJOR PREEMPTIVE STRIKE ON THE CHINESE WITHOUT FIRST PREPARING THEIR PUBLIC OPINION, WE WOULD EXPECT TO SEE MORE OF A PSYCHOLOGICAL BUILD-UP THAN UP TO THE PRESENT WITHIN THE USSR, SIMPLY BECAUSE MOSCOW WOULD HAVE TO ESTIMATE THAT THE CHINESE WOULD FIGHT BACK.

5. MANY RULES OF REASON ARGUE AGAINST A SOVIET ATTACK AGAINST THE CHINESE WHICH WOULD LEAD TO WAR OR AN UNCERTAIN OUTCOME. OTHER RISKS ARE TOO OBVIOUS TO REQUIRE MORE THAN ENUMERATION, NAMELY, DAMAGE TO SOVIET INTERNATIONAL STANDING, ALIENATION OF THOSE CHINESE ON WHOM MOSCOW MAY BE RELYING FOR THE POST-MAO PERIOD, THE ADDITION OF A NEW CRISIS TO THE PROBLEMS THE SOVIETS ARE FACING IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND EASTERN EUROPE, AS WELL AS THE UNCERTAINTY (IN THEIR MINDS) OF US REACTION. FURTHERMORE, OUR OWN INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM MAY BE SUFFICIENTLY ILLUMINATING TO GIVE ANY GREAT POWER PAUSE.

6. ON THE OTHER SIDE, SOME SOVIET MILITARY (AND MAYBE POLITICAL) LEADERS MAY BE EMBOLDENED TO ARGUE FOR A PREVENTIVE STRIKE,

POINTING TO THE SUCCESSES WHICH WERE QUICKLY ACHIEVED IN HUNGARY AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA, AND WERE FOLLOWED LATER BY SOME DEGREE OF POLITICAL ACCOMMODATION. THESE WERE OF COURSE OBTAINED WITHIN A SECURED SOVIET ORBIT (WHICH MAY OR MAY NOT INCLUDE ROMANIA), AND ANY BROADER ADVENTURE COULD INVOLVE UNPREDICTABLE FACTORS OF NUCLEAR

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STRATEGY. GIVEN THE LIKELIHOOD THAT SINO-SOVIET HOSTILITY WILL PRODUCE CONTINUING BORDER INCIDENTS, IT IS POSSIBLE THAT SHARPER PUNITIVE MEASURES WITH MORE ADVANCED WEAPONS (SHORT OR NUCLEAR) MAY BE TAKEN, CONFORMING TO A SOVIET ASSESSMENT OF RATIONAL POLITICAL AND MILITARY LIMITS.

7. BEYOND THIS, PREDICTIONS ARE MOST DIFFICULT TO MAKE, BUT IN OUR VIEW THE PRESENT PROBABILITY IS THAT, APART FROM USING BORDER WARFARE AS THE MEANS OF TEACHING THE CHINESE EXEMPLARY LESSONS, THE SOVIETS WILL REFRAIN FROM A MAJOR ESCALATION.

8. DEPT PLEASE PASS AS DESIRED. GP-3

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