Clear goal, flexible means:
How the Soviet Union pushed Jaruzelski towards action

<1>
By now, a vast amount of archival evidence is available in Russia and Poland along with the important Kukliński documents that were released by the CIA in 2009. Numerous memoirs have appeared in both Poland and Russia, and these, if used with great caution and checked against the documentary record, provide useful insights. My remarks here draw on this huge body of evidence. Let me start by laying out two divergent positions, and then I will explain why both positions are flawed.

<2>
Until 1990, General Jaruzelski staunchly denied that the Soviet Union had ever intended to invade Poland in 1981; and even as late as September 1991, in an interview with a Soviet newsweekly, he was evasive about the matter. No doubt, his discretion prior to the final breakup of the Soviet Union was attributable to his desire not to antagonize his Soviet allies. Soon after the USSR collapsed, however, Jaruzelski sharply changed his position, arguing that he had reluctantly imposed martial law to forestall Soviet military intervention and restore order in Polish society. In two volumes of memoirs and countless interviews, Jaruzelski repeatedly claimed that in 1981 he viewed martial law as a "tragic necessity" and the "lesser of two evils."

<3>
This position has recently been challenged by a few Western analysts, including Wilfried Loth, who have asserted that the Soviet Politburo by 1980-1981 had completely forsaken the option of using force in Eastern Europe. Brezhnev himself, the argument goes, had secretly renounced the Brezhnev Doctrine (the phrase coined in the West to describe the USSR's public rationale for the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia), which essentially had given the Soviet Union both a right and a duty to preserve Communism in Eastern Europe through any means necessary, including the use of military force. If in fact Brezhnev had abandoned his eponymous doctrine soon after 1968, this would mean that the whole thrust of Soviet policy in Eastern Europe had changed. The implication is that even if the martial law operation in Poland in 1981 had gone awry and the Communist regime had collapsed amid chaotic violence, the Soviet Politburo would not have sent in troops.
Neither of these conflicting positions is tenable. To be sure, Jaruzelski’s claims about the Soviet Union do have considerable merit. The CPSU Politburo and the Soviet High Command were exerting relentless pressure on Polish leaders in 1980-1981. The Soviet Union deployed many divisions of combat-ready troops around Poland’s borders and in the western USSR, conducted a long series of conspicuous Warsaw Pact and bilateral military exercises, informed Polish officials that elaborate plans had been drawn up for a Soviet-led invasion, undertook reconnaissance and other preparations to carry out those plans, and made repeated, vehement exhortations through bilateral and multilateral channels. These various actions, in combination, might well have caused Jaruzelski to fear that Soviet troops would invade Poland unless he imposed martial law. Whether Soviet leaders actually intended to invade is a very different matter — a matter to be explored in greater detail below. But regardless of what Soviet intentions truly were, the key point to bear in mind is that Jaruzelski and other senior Polish officials in 1980 and 1981 were not privy to the internal deliberations of the Soviet Politburo and could never be fully certain about Soviet intentions. Hence, Jaruzelski and Kania might have genuinely believed that an invasion would occur if a solution "from within" Poland (i.e., a martial law crackdown) did not materialize. Indeed, Soviet leaders at various points during the crisis deliberately sought to create the impression that the USSR would invade — even if they did not intend to follow up on it — because they hoped that this would induce the Polish authorities to take action. In that respect, the declassified materials are compatible with Jaruzelski’s claims about his motives and behavior.

Nonetheless, even though Jaruzelski’s memoirs accurately depict the excruciating pressure he and Kania were facing from the Soviet Union, his account of the crisis omits a crucial matter. Jaruzelski fails to mention that as the decisive moment approached in 1981, he actually urged the Soviet Union to send troops to bail him out. The reason that Jaruzelski was appointed First Secretary of the PZPR in mid-October 1981 is that Soviet leaders believed that he, unlike Kania, would be willing to comply with their demands for a crackdown. Jaruzelski did promptly move ahead with the final preparations for the "lesser of two evils"— that is, martial law — but he also began considering the possibility of relying on the "greater of two evils," Soviet military intervention. His overtures about this option evidently began in late October 1981 and continued, with ever greater urgency, until the day martial law was introduced. Apparently, Jaruzelski by late 1981 had come to believe that the martial law operation would be unsuccessful unless it went hand-in-hand with external military intervention. Ironically, the members of the Soviet Politburo had held precisely the same view until Jaruzelski became party leader in October 1981. In the final weeks (and particularly the final few days) before the martial law operation began, Jaruzelski was pleading with Soviet leaders to send troops into Poland to assist him with the crackdown, and by all indications he was devastated when they turned down his requests.
The newly available evidence on this matter from many independent sources casts serious doubt on Jaruzelski's repeated assertions that his decision to introduce martial law in December 1981 was intended solely to spare Poland the trauma of Soviet military intervention. In the end, rather than seeking to avert that option (as he had on numerous occasions earlier in the crisis), he actually was promoting it.

But if Jaruzelski’s version of events is problematic, the notion that the Brezhnev Doctrine was no longer in effect by 1980-1981 is even more dubious. This argument flies in the face of a vast amount of evidence. The first step the Soviet Politburo took in August 1980, after forming a special commission to deal with the Polish crisis, was to authorize the mobilization of a sizable number of Soviet tank and mechanized infantry divisions "in case military assistance is provided to Poland." From August 1980 until the fall of 1981, Soviet leaders were fully prepared to send these divisions into Poland to help the Polish Communist regime introduce martial law. The only reason that Soviet (and Czechoslovak and East German) divisions did not move into Poland is that whenever the Soviet Politburo stepped up its pressure and proposed the immediate deployment of Soviet troops to facilitate a vigorous crackdown on the Polish opposition, Kania and Jaruzelski warned that it would be better if Polish forces imposed martial law on their own. If the Polish leaders had instead been willing to receive external military support during this period, the Soviet divisions would have entered Poland to assist them in crushing Solidarity and restoring orthodox Communist rule. Although the scenario for the entry of Soviet troops into Poland in 1980 or 1981 would have been different from the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (when Soviet troops intervened en masse against the existing regime), the notion that the Brezhnev Doctrine was irrevocably dead by 1980 is fallacious.

Soviet leaders had ordered the use of military force in Afghanistan (a country of much less strategic significance than Poland) in late 1979 despite serious initial misgivings, and although they relied on an "internal" solution in Poland, this was no different from Soviet policy during earlier severe crises in Eastern Europe. In 1968, Brezhnev and his colleagues had repeatedly urged the Czechoslovak Communist Party’s First Secretary, Alexander Dubček, to remove the most outspoken reformers and to reinstate censorship of the press. Only when Brezhnev finally realized that no amount of pressure would be sufficient to induce Dubček to crack down did he reluctantly agree to proceed with an invasion. In 1980-1981, as in 1968, military force was regarded as a last-ditch option that would be pursued only after all other options had failed. But this in no way implies that the Soviet Union had renounced the Brezhnev Doctrine by 1981, any more than it had in 1968.
The notion that the Brezhnev Doctrine was defunct by 1980-1981 implies that the Soviet Union would not have intervened in Poland in December 1981 even if the martial law operation had failed and widespread violence had erupted, threatening the garrisons of the Soviet Union's Northern Group of Forces. This argument is wholly unconvincing. Admittedly, no one can say for sure what the Soviet Politburo would have done under these hypothetical circumstances. But it seems extremely unlikely – indeed inconceivable – that the Soviet Union would have stayed on the sidelines and allowed the Polish Communist regime and Soviet troops in Poland to come under deadly attack. At a crucial CPSU Politburo meeting on 10 December 1981, Yuri Andropov, warned that the Soviet military must "take steps to ensure that the lines of communication between the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic that run through Poland are safeguarded." Protecting the physical security of the USSR's Northern Group of Forces (the roughly 58,000 soldiers deployed in Poland) was an even higher priority. The only way to accomplish either of these tasks in a dire emergency was by sending in Soviet troops.

There is no question that the Soviet Union could have sent troops into Poland if civil war had broken out there in December 1981. In the spring of 1981, Brezhnev had noted that the commander-in-chief of the Warsaw Pact, Marshal Kulikov, "has worked out military plans for several options to be implemented in case of an emergency." These plans, according to the memoirs of General Vitalii Pavlov, who was the KGB station chief in Warsaw during the Polish crisis, were an updated and expanded version of the preparations that had been made in the autumn of 1980 after the Suslov Commission laid out a mobilization schedule for the Soviet Army “in case military assistance is provided to Poland.” Kulikov’s chief deputy, General Gribkov, who oversaw most of the military planning and preparations in 1980-1981, later confirmed that full-fledged operational plans existed in December 1981 to send Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops to Poland if an emergency arose:

Was there a viable plan to send Soviet troops into Poland? Yes, there was such a plan. What is more, reconnaissance of entry routes and of concentration points for the allied forces was carried out [by Soviet, East German, and Czechoslovak specialists] with the active participation of Polish officials.¹

Gribkov denied "that any final decision on whether to send in troops" had been made by the time

martial law was imposed, but he left no doubt that "allied troops would have entered Poland" if Soviet leaders had ordered them to.

<11> Polish officials themselves certainly believed, as they stated in a top-secret document of 25 November 1981, that if martial law resulted in uncontrollable violence and bloodshed, "Warsaw Pact forces would intervene." Mikhail Suslov had touched on this same point a week earlier when he told the CPSU Central Committee that "extreme necessity [in Poland] would warrant extreme measures" — a term that invariably referred to external military intervention. He noted that the Soviet Politburo "during the entire crisis in Poland has been searching for political means of resolving the conflict," but he echoed Brezhnev's repeated statements that the Soviet Union would not – and could not – "leave Poland in the lurch." Suslov assured the Central Committee that the Soviet Politburo would do "whatever is necessary to preserve and strengthen the Polish People's Republic as a fundamental component of the socialist commonwealth and a vital, permanent member-state of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and the Council for Economic Mutual Assistance."

<12> To be sure, if Jaruzelski had refused to follow through, Soviet leaders would first have orchestrated his ouster and brought in a hardliner who would have heeded their wishes. Ryszard Kuklinski secretly disclosed this scenario to the U.S. authorities at the time, and documents from the Russian archives bear out Kuklinski's claims. Suslov stressed to the CPSU Central Committee in mid-November that the Soviet Politburo was "offering comprehensive support to the healthy forces in the PZPR," including Polish army generals, who could, if necessary, step in and impose martial law if Jaruzelski failed to do so. Suslov described the hardline PZPR officials and pro-Soviet Polish military commanders as "our main reserve in the struggle to rejuvenate the [Polish] party and restore its combat capability," and he noted that "we have taken them under our wing." The clear implication was that if Jaruzelski tried to renege on his commitment to introduce martial law, the Soviet Politburo would turn to one of the hardliners as a replacement. Soviet leaders preferred to rely on Jaruzelski because they realized that he would carry greater credibility within Poland than the hardliners would, but until the last moment they were not fully certain that he would have the fortitude to follow through. Hence, the need for a "reserve" of "healthy forces" who could be brought in.

<13> Soviet leaders, unlike Jaruzelski, were fully confident that the planned martial law operation would be successful provided that Jaruzelski implemented it without letting up. The last thing they wanted was to give him a crutch that might cause him, if only subconsciously, to refrain from cracking down as ruthlessly as possible. That is why in December 1981 they turned down his insistent pleas for the
sending of Soviet troops. But this in no way means that the Soviet Politburo would have refrained from sending troops into Poland to prevent all-out civil war and the violent collapse of the Communist regime. Of course we cannot know with absolute certainty what would have happened. The members of the Politburo, like almost any collective body, did not want to make a final decision about "extreme measures" unless a dire emergency forced them to. Because they were confident that the martial law operation would succeed if Jaruzelski cracked down vigorously, they believed they could avoid deciding in advance about an unlikely and unpalatable military contingency. This calculation was amply borne out. Jaruzelski's success in imposing his "internal solution" on 12-13 December 1981 spared Soviet leaders from having to make any final decision about the dispatch of Soviet troops to Poland.

But it is a fantasy to suggest that the Brezhnev Doctrine had already been renounced in 1981. Such claims reflect a fundamental lack of understanding of the events of both 1981 and 1989. Not until 1989 was the Brezhnev Doctrine finally eliminated once and for all.

**Autor:**

Professor Mark Kramer

Director of the Cold War Studies Program at Harvard University

mkramer@fas.harvard.edu