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Military Issues

Control of Soviet Strategic Nuclear Weapons Before, During, and After the Coup

~~(S)~~ Prior to the coup, three individuals were thought to be part of the nuclear release process – the president, the minister of defense, and the chief of the General Staff. The reconfigured union that is expected to emerge after the postcoup transition period will retain centralized control of nuclear weapons, but leaders of at least the largest republics (Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan) are expected to play a role in nuclear decisionmaking.

~~(S)~~ Prior to the coup, the decisionmaking process for employing nuclear weapons was assessed to be highly centralized, with the Soviet president, as commander in chief, having the dominant role. In the most time-constrained circumstances (such as responding to an enemy attack), the president probably had the authority to order a retaliatory strike. Given sufficient time, the president probably would have been required to consult with key members of the U.S.S.R. Security or Defense Council.

~~(S)~~ Evidence suggests the actual implementation of a nuclear release decision requires a special nuclear release authorization that the president, defense minister, and General Staff chief generate. This authorization is transmitted to a separate facility, presumably a General Staff command post, where the General Staff generates launch orders and transmits them down the chain of command to the strategic nuclear forces. DIA judges that, in the event the National Command Authority is unable to carry out its duties, the General Staff could execute the forces.

~~(S)~~ During the coup, President Gorbachev's role in nuclear release authority was apparently revoked. Gorbachev himself indicated that, during his detention in the Crimea, the coup conspirators removed the suitcase that carries his transmission device. This would indicate that key members of the emergency committee then running the government held nuclear release authority.

~~(S)~~ Immediately following the coup's failure, precoup release procedures were apparently restored, with Russian leader Boris Yeltsin acknowledged as a de facto alternate commander in chief. Gorbachev and Yeltsin signed an agreement immediately following Gorbachev's reinstatement as president legally authorizing each to act in the other's stead should one of them become incapacitated. Yeltsin and other Russian republic officials have also stated a desire for a future Russian republic role in the nuclear release process.

~~(S)~~ Under the interim government arrangements adopted on 5 September, control over nuclear weapons remains centralized. However, while there is no direct evidence, republic leaders from Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan probably would be involved in nuclear release decisions, time permitting, possibly acting through a subcommittee of the transitional government's State Council (a top-level committee consisting of the U.S.S.R. president and republic leaders).

~~(S)~~ In the reconfigured union, which probably will emerge in the next year, the reconstituted center probably will retain control over nuclear weapons; however, republic leaders will almost certainly demand some role in the nuclear decisionmaking process. Although the precise nature of nuclear command and control arrangements under such a system is uncertain, the authority to employ nuclear weapons will probably be vested in a small committee consisting of the union president and leaders from Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, while the all-union General Staff will continue playing an important role in transmitting nuclear release codes. If all nuclear weapons ultimately are deployed only on Russian territory, non-Russian republic leaders' claims for a nuclear decisionmaking role will be diminished.

Directorate for Research

OSD 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b) (3) - 10 U.S.C., Section 924

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