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Risk and Uncertainty in Soviet Deliberations About War

Benjamin S. Lambeth

October 1981

A Project AIR FORCE report
prepared for the
United States Air Force



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PREFACE

The Rand Corporation is providing analytical support to the Assistant Chief of Staff/Intelligence, Hq United States Air Force, on the question of Soviet conduct in possible military confrontations with the United States. This effort is concerned with identifiable relationships among Soviet military doctrine, force posture, and operational practice. It examines how specific Soviet capabilities and styles might influence major crises and war.

This report surveys the elements of risk, uncertainty, and unpredictability that might moderate Soviet behavior and undermine the confidence with which Soviet decisionmakers would consider entering into a major military engagement with the United States. Although the report does not question the substantial threat implications of Soviet force improvements that have been under way in recent years, it does describe certain realities of Soviet style and leadership concern about possible Soviet military inadequacies that make the more ominous features of Soviet doctrine and force development appear somewhat less alarming. The analysis is based on a combination of evidence suggested by past Soviet crisis behavior, information offered in Soviet literature concerning troop management and training, and inferences from known or suspected Soviet political practices, organizational characteristics, and operational concerns.

This report is a contribution to Rand's Project AIR FORCE study entitled "Red Strategic Campaign Analysis."

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SUMMARY

Most assessments of the Soviet threat concentrate on factors that contribute to Soviet strength. By contrast, vulnerability analysis is an undeveloped art form in Western strategic research. This is not surprising given the dramatic gains that Soviet force modernization has posted since 1965. Yet for all the appropriateness of U.S. concern over Soviet military programs, we should not overdramatize Soviet strategic prowess. Exaggerated portrayals of Soviet capability lead to unwarranted Western weakness in the face of assertive Soviet behavior and tend to compromise legitimate arguments for needed improvements in the U.S. defense posture. Despite the enormous improvement in Soviet weapons and the robustness of Soviet doctrine, numerous uncertainties would temper Soviet deliberations about the use of force in any crisis laden with major risks of nuclear escalation. These uncertainties help reduce the image of Soviet military power to more human and manageable proportions.

One indication of Soviet strategic uncertainty lies in the important qualifications contained in Soviet military doctrine itself. Unlike the confident assertions that pervade the literature on the requirements of Soviet force design, Soviet commentary on what a nuclear war might look like is highly ambivalent and imprecise. Soviet authorities radiate unsettled feelings about such issues as how the war might start, how long it would last, whether it would be containable at the conventional level, what the dynamics of transition to nuclear operations would entail, and what the endgame would involve in terms of Soviet prospects for victory. Accordingly, whatever Soviet doctrine may say about the nature of modern war, any decision to use large-scale force would involve a substantial measure of guesswork. In these circumstances, Soviet performance would depend at least as much on how adept the Soviet leaders were at responding to challenges and opportunities as it would on any intrinsic merits of their previous concepts and preparations.

Another factor that would contribute to Soviet hesitancy at the edge of war is the pronounced risk-aversion that has characterized Soviet crisis behavior since World War II. Although the Soviets have long been opportunists, they have generally avoided indiscriminate muscle flexing. Instead, their tendency has been to talk tough as a matter of practice yet to reserve actual intervention for cases where they had supreme interests at stake, a high probability of U.S. noninvolvement, and a comfortable prospect of success with moderate investment of military capital. Even though the Soviet concept of security has always featured a prominent element of expansionism, Soviet leaders from Lenin onward have consistently believed that time is on their side. As a consequence, they have been reluctant to "push" history with attempts to garner cheap political gains before the natural development of the right conditions.

This inherent caution could be reinforced by concern over the ways Soviet plans could be upset because of weaknesses in combat readiness, command and control, alliance solidarity, and military morale, particularly if the Soviet leaders believed that continued inaction or carefully measured probing would be less risky than initiatives that could unexpectedly backfire. Divergent strains in their ideology and doctrine make the Soviets uniquely prone to approach-avoidance conflicts in crisis decisionmaking. On the one hand, their offensive military orientation, their belief in the commanding importance of initiative, and their compulsion to check undesirable trains of events before they become unmanageable incline them toward rejecting passivity and treating forceful preemption as the supreme measure of leadership

vitality. On the other hand, their abhorrence of momentary acts that might threaten to undo their existing gains, their tendency to draw sharp distinctions between the desirable and the necessary, and their associated faith in the inevitability of socialism impose a powerful braking influence on their willingness to seek radical solutions when events might be safely left to continue for another day.

This is not to say that in all crises involving the threat of war with the United States the Soviet leaders would invariably find themselves caught up in paralyzing irresolution. Much would depend on the situation, its relevance to Soviet security interests, and the balance between political stakes and military risks. Nonetheless, in any confrontation where escalation to major war appeared possible, certain practical worries that remain muted during peacetime could heavily influence Soviet deliberations. One such concern involves the probable operational performance of Soviet forces. The Soviet leadership doubtless recognizes numerous deficiencies in its arsenal that are unobservable in the West yet loom large in Soviet planning. The flexibility of their mechanisms for selective use of nuclear weapons, the technical reliability of their ICBM force, and the ability of their interceptors to deal with the U.S. low-altitude bomber threat may be cases in point.

Another source of possible anxiety concerns the operational capabilities of U.S. forces. Because of their deep respect and admiration for American technological prowess, the Soviets may attribute larger-than-life performance capabilities to U.S. strategic systems and regard these weapons as being far less imperfect than we characteristically view them. For example, the Soviets are probably less persuaded of the widely discussed Minuteman vulnerability problem than most U.S. analysts. If Soviet decisionmakers draw any political comfort from this U.S. liability, it probably derives more from official U.S. expressions of anxiety than from any independent technical evaluations of their own counterforce capabilities. Their uncertainties about how successful a Soviet disarming attack might be, rather than any vicarious reassurance from U.S. manifestations of nervousness about Minuteman survivability, would probably play the commanding role in any Soviet consideration of the first-strike option in a crisis.

Soviet uncertainty could involve doubts about American leadership rationality under pressure. Past patterns of inconsistency in U.S. foreign policy conduct have fostered a Soviet image of U.S. unpredictability that could exert a major restraining influence on any Soviet temptation to use force in severe crises. In the unlikely case such unpredictability sparked serious Soviet concern that the United States might initiate the large-scale use of nuclear weapons, the Soviet urge to preempt would probably overwhelm any arguments for hesitancy. In most circumstances, however, the Soviets would have little cause to fear such a precipitous U.S. move (at least at the intercontinental-war level). Any Soviet decision to preempt would have to account for the possibility that the United States would either execute the countervalue portion of the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) in retaliation or launch the entire component of its nonreserve nuclear forces upon assessment of incoming attack.

Another area where Soviet leaders might have reason for second thoughts in their crisis decisionmaking involves the danger of Soviet operations becoming disrupted in the heat of battle. To a certain extent, all military commanders share such concern, regardless of their ideology or political culture. It would be particularly influential in Soviet planning because the Soviet Union adheres to a doctrine that relies heavily on initiative and surprise. Soviet military planners bear a responsibility unique to holders of offensively oriented doctrines to weigh any prewar situation with extraordinary prescience, because the chances of success are heavily bound up with the correctness of planning assumptions. Opportunities for regrouping and trying again, particularly in the nuclear age, are likely to be few and far between.

Evidence of the latent unease this problem inspires in Soviet strategic calculations can be

found across a broad range of Soviet military writing and planning. Soviet military articles periodically brood over the danger of "losing one's bearings" in the confusion of combat. A related malaise concerns the perils of overconfidence and the danger that inadequate circumspection at the threshold of war could draw the Soviet Union into a disastrous military cul-de-sac from which graceful extrication would be impossible.

Many Soviet commanders appreciate the potential cost of overcentralization that pervades the Soviet armed forces from the General Staff down to field units. Each echelon of the highly stratified Soviet command structure depends on authority from above, and there is little allowance for independent judgment at lower levels. Although this can be an asset while Soviet forces maintain offensive momentum, it can constitute a weakness when command and control links are broken, original plans are derailed, and effective improvisation becomes required to salvage some measure of control from a rapidly eroding situation. Concern over such a possibility, reinforced by forebodings over Soviet combat inexperience and doubt about the reliability of non-Soviet Warsaw Pact forces, could cause restraint in any Soviet contemplation of war against the United States and NATO.

After all is said and done, much uncertainty remains about Soviet strategic uncertainty. Concern over the element of risk can cut two ways, depending on how the Soviet leadership perceives the stakes of a situation. It can warrant hesitancy and caution, but it can also provide strong incentives toward forceful action aimed at dominating events before they have a chance to slip out of grasp. In the remote event that Soviet decisionmakers had finally decided on a full-fledged invasion of Europe and had carefully planned for such an attack in advance, they would also have reconciled themselves to the possibility of broader superpower war and accepted the potential costs of such a larger war as a fair price for the fruits of theater victory. In the more likely event both superpowers found themselves inadvertently caught in a conventional skirmish in Europe (perhaps through expansion of some unrelated third-area crisis) that neither side was eager to pursue, the sorts of uncertainties discussed above might well lead the Soviets toward some face-saving settlement before the nuclear point of no return had been reached.

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the years when American strategic superiority overshadowed Soviet power, most Western observers tended to dismiss Soviet doctrine as a quaint anachronism thoroughly out of touch with the modern realities of nuclear deterrence. Soviet stress on such martial themes as preemption and victory, notwithstanding the incapacity of Soviet forces to lend them credibility, was generally interpreted as little more than a combination of routine military incantation and nervous whistling in the nuclear dark. The measure of Soviet strength was felt to lie, instead, in such hard observables as the Soviet backdown during the Cuban missile crisis and Moscow's apparent indisposition to challenge the United States to a determined race for strategic preeminence immediately thereafter. In these circumstances, the superficial bombast of Soviet pronouncements tended to resonate with hollow tones. Aside from occasional voices urging a more concerned view of long-term Soviet strategic ambitions, the consensus held that the Soviets had finally come to recognize their proper place in the nuclear relationship and could be counted on to conduct themselves with circumspection.¹

In retrospect, most analysts now realize with chagrin and concern the full extent to which these early counsels of optimism failed to comprehend the tenacity of Soviet military views on the prerequisites of Soviet security. While Khrushchev was in power, these views constituted parochial desiderata of the Soviet armed forces left unrequited in the wake of his capricious political leadership. However, the leadership under Brezhnev promptly instituted a return to more traditional strategic planning, rejecting Khrushchev's "harebrained schemes" (as they came to be depicted by his critics) and restoring the classic injunctions of Soviet military doctrine to a place of central importance in the formulation of Soviet defense programs and policies.²

Since that time, the pendulum of U.S. assessments of the Soviet challenge has swung from complacency to near alarm as a result of the steady gains that Soviet force modernization has posted over the past 15 years. Although Soviet doctrine itself has remained largely unchanged since the early 1960s, the Soviet force posture has moved toward such close congruence with the avowed precepts of that doctrine that many Western commentators are now convinced the Soviet leaders actually believe they are within reach of being able to fight and win a nuclear war. This image of Soviet military robustness has been further enhanced by the vigorous pattern of recent Soviet third-world interventionist activities and has fostered growing concern

¹In a characteristic reflection of this widespread attitude during the early 1960s, one specialist on Soviet affairs observed that although "the Soviet Union would like to be the military equal or even the superior" of the United States, "the important question is not what the Soviet Union would like but what it can get." Given the dramatic U.S. lead in the quality and quantity of its strategic forces, he added, "it seems likely that . . . the Soviet Union will continue to be second in military power to the United States." Herbert S. Dinerstein, "The United States and the Soviet Union: Standoff or Confrontation?" in John Erickson (ed.), *The Military-Technical Revolution*, Praeger, New York, 1966, pp. 274-277. The ultimate enshrinement of this wishful thinking, however, occurred in Secretary of Defense McNamara's confident proclamation in 1965 that the Soviet leaders "have decided that they have lost the quantitative race, and they are not seeking to engage us in that contest. There is no indication that the Soviets are seeking to develop a strategic force as large as ours." *U.S. News and World Report*, April 12, 1965.

²This sentiment received particularly forceful expression in a major article by the Chief of the General Staff, Marshal M. V. Zakharov, shortly following Khrushchev's dismissal. In a thinly veiled attack on the former Soviet leader, Zakharov scored the "so-called strategic farsightedness of persons who lack even a remote background in military strategy" and asserted: "With the emergence of nuclear-missile weapons, cybernetics, electronics, and computer equipment, any subjective approach to military problems, harebrained scheming, and superficiality can be very expensive and can cause irreparable damage." "The Imperative Demand of Our Time," *Krasnaia zvezda*, February 4, 1965.

that the Soviet leaders may see a lucrative connection between their achievement of parity and their potential for assertive political behavior at the expense of the West. A prominent American journalist not normally given to brooding over the Soviet threat, for example, voiced concern well over a year before Afghanistan that the Soviets might eventually "talk themselves into the most dangerous of all positions: the self-intoxicating position of believing that they can get away with anything."³

In principle, such attention to Soviet military programs and conduct is both proper and long overdue. After years of misplaced hope that the Soviets could be brought to accept a quiescent balance of power stabilized by SALT and detente, most observers now recognize that the Soviet leaders harbor a distinctive vision of their security needs and stand deeply committed to a long-term competition with the United States for global political ascendancy. From this premise, it follows that the first step toward formulating an appropriate Western response must entail an unsentimental grasp of Soviet motivations for what they actually are, rather than for what, in the best of all worlds, we might wish them to be.

At the same time, we must caution against overdramatizing Soviet prowess beyond the bounds of reason. Not only would an exaggerated image of Soviet strength engender Western paralysis in the face of persistent Soviet exuberance, it would also threaten to erode the credibility of precisely those arguments whose broad acceptance by the American public will ultimately be required to sustain needed improvements in the U.S. defense posture. Furthermore, it would be contradicted by long-standing evidence of Soviet leadership conservatism and risk-aversion.⁴

In isolation from political context, Soviet doctrinal rhetoric projects a stark image of Soviet singularity of purpose. On closer examination, however, the message transmitted by this rhetoric is, like Wagnerian opera, not quite as bad as it first sounds. For one thing, despite the Spartan bravado and echoes of Machiavellian *virtu* in their various ideological perorations, the Soviet leaders view the world just as darkly as we do. Having never fought a nuclear war before and thus thoroughly lacking in practical experience at it, they fully appreciate that strategic planning operates in a realm of vast obscurity, in which reliable certitudes are notably few and far between. Moreover, although Soviet military forces and concepts reflect an undeniable combat orientation, their principal purpose remains deterrence rather than pursuit of exploitable war options. The fact that, through tradition and preference, the Soviets have sought security in hedges against failures of deterrence rather than in reliance on the stabilizing influence of "assured destruction" capabilities in no way bespeaks any underlying disposition to put those hedges to the test.

Soviet rulers, like most political leaders, regard themselves first and foremost as caretakers of their cumulative national accomplishments. They are not prone to momentary acts of self-indulgence that might threaten to undo those cherished gains. Given their distinctive psychology and historical experiences, they may even harbor special incentives toward caution unique to totalitarian political systems. Not only do they bear abiding responsibilities for the preservation of Soviet life and property, they have additional motivations to maintain communist rule and their own political incumbencies, considerations that could far outweigh their more traditional obligations of stewardship in perceived immediacy and importance.⁵

³Joseph Kraft, "Russia's Winning Streak," *The Washington Post*, May 4, 1978.

⁴See, for example, Dennis Ross, *Risk Aversion in Soviet Defense Decisionmaking*, Center for International and Strategic Affairs, University of California, Los Angeles, August 1980.

⁵This distinctively "Soviet" ordering of political values has roots running back to the earliest days of Bolshevik rule and was particularly manifest during the years of tension immediately preceding the outbreak of World War II. Adam Ulam argues that once the specter of war arose with the advent of Hitler, the Soviet regime remained steadfastly

Most assessments of Soviet capability naturally emphasize elements that contribute to Soviet strength. By contrast, vulnerability analysis remains an undeveloped art form in Western strategic research.⁶ This essay aims to provide an exploratory venture in the latter direction. It seeks to illuminate some of the unknowns, uncertainties, and doubts that would be likely to weigh heavily and counsel circumspection in any Soviet consideration of force employment in a crisis laden with imminent risks of nuclear war. Its focus is predominantly political and institutional rather than technical. One category of uncertainty stems from the inherent imponderables of what Clausewitz termed the "fog of war" and involves potential anomalies in the performance of weapons and associated infrastructures generic to all military organizations, regardless of doctrine or national style. These sorts of largely technical considerations (whether particular weapons would work as advertised, whether timely warning of enemy initiatives would be received, whether critical intelligence and communications flows would be maintained, and so on) are familiar concerns of commanders and planners and need not be catalogued in detail here.⁷

Another category of uncertainty consists of deeper fears and proclivities that are less self-evident, yet whose comprehension remains vital to any balanced appraisal of how the Soviet leaders would be inclined to view their limitations in a severe confrontation of countervailing resolve. Some of these concerns find expression in published Soviet doctrinal writings. Others are occasionally observable in characteristic modes of Soviet crisis behavior. Perhaps the most revealing ones are in the periodic indications the Soviets unwittingly telegraph about the sorts of operational shortcomings they fret about and whose net effect is to portray an adversary far less assured of its combat virtuosity than a superficial review of its doctrine and forces might suggest. It is these uniquely "Soviet" sources of diffuse anxiety and doubt to which the following discussion is primarily addressed. Its principal objective is to explore those political, psychological, institutional, and cultural sources of probable Soviet strategic nervousness that tend to place the more strident refrains of Soviet doctrine in a less distressing light. The result should help reduce the image of Soviet prowess projected by the raw evidence of Soviet military R&D and force development down to the more human and manageable proportions it actually deserves.

concerned over the threefold danger of Soviet military defeat, breakdown of the communist system, and dissolution of Stalin's personal rule. Stalin's failure to address his people for two weeks following the Nazi invasion in June 1941 may have indicated that his fear of the third consequence was at least as strong as that of the first. Ambassador Ivan Maisky recounted years later that "from the moment of attack by Germany, Stalin locked himself in his study, would not see anybody, and did not take any part in state decisions." Khrushchev, for his part, maintained during his own incumbency that Stalin had lost his nerve and was unable to regain composure for some time in the wake of the disaster that his foolhardy military policies had produced. With due allowance for the idiosyncratic nature of this episode, it raises an interesting question as to what extent the more recent Soviet emphasis on active and passive defenses for the Moscow area has been inspired by this special attachment to the importance of regime survival. See Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1967*. Praeger, New York, 1968, pp. 314-316.

⁶See, however, Peter H. Vigor, "Doubts and Difficulties Confronting a Would-Be Soviet Attacker," *RUSI Journal*, June 1980, pp. 32-38; and Lieutenant Colonel John D. Baker, Jr., "Where the Soviets Are Vulnerable," *Army*, August 1978, pp. 22-24. A well-argued case for greater incorporation of such analysis into U.S. threat assessment and operational planning is presented in Major General Jasper A. Welch, Jr., USAF, "The Role of Vulnerability Analysis in Military Planning for Deterrence and Defense of Invasion Threats to NATO" (unpublished, June 1976).

⁷A thoughtful survey of these technical imponderables that could complicate military decisionmaking in deep crises may be found in Stanley Sinkiewicz, "Observations on the Impact of Uncertainty in Strategic Analysis," *World Politics*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, October 1979, pp. 90-110. See also Bruce W. Bennett, *Uncertainty in ICBM Survivability*, The Rand Corporation, P-6394, October 1979.

II. AMBIGUITIES IN SOVIET MILITARY DOCTRINE

Perhaps the most immediately obvious indication of Soviet uncertainty in the realm of force employment planning can be found in the important qualifications and omissions contained in Soviet military doctrine itself. At first glance, Soviet doctrine presents an image of self-confidence as a result of its systematic organization and assertive style of expression. On closer examination, however, this surface impression of "having all the answers" turns out to be substantially misleading.

In Soviet parlance, military doctrine is commonly defined as a set of organized views on "the nature of contemporary wars that might be unleashed . . . against the Soviet Union and on the resultant demands, which flow from such views, for the preparation of the country and its armed forces for war."¹ Not surprisingly, Soviet writings tend to display far more confidence on the second score than the first. Where such matters as the basic nature of the security dilemma and the required concepts and hardware for dealing with it are concerned, the Soviets show little sign of confusion or indecision. In their view, although the destructiveness of nuclear weaponry has made major war highly unlikely, it nonetheless remains a distinct possibility because the opposing social systems have irreconcilable incompatibilities, which must be duly recognized and accommodated to in Soviet defense planning. A force capable of merely inflicting punitive retaliation following an enemy attack is considered insufficient because it is inherently unreliable and could fail to compel enemy restraint in a crisis precisely when it was most needed. In the Soviet perspective, the only sensible and trustworthy foundation of national security is a force posture capable of decisively seizing the initiative at the brink of war and actually fighting toward specific political and military objectives. Such a posture is not only likely to offer the strongest guarantee of continued deterrence, but it will also provide the military wherewithal that would be needed for coping responsibly in the remote event that deterrence failed.

The image of the nuclear predicament and the various policy measures dictated by it inspires an extensive litany of ensuing Soviet strategic principles and operational beliefs. The necessity of numerical weapons abundance, the advisability of timely preemption, the importance of maintaining offensive momentum, the continued relevance of strategic defense, the utility of shock and surprise, and the possibility of meaningful victory are only some of the more striking features of Soviet military thought that distinguish it from prevailing American deterrence theory and figure importantly in Soviet weapons acquisition and force design. Apart from their uniformly combative orientation, they share a common status of almost axiomatic finality in Soviet strategic discourse that renders them immune to significant disputation or doubt.

In sharp contrast to these received certitudes about the imperatives of Soviet weapons procurement and contingency planning, Soviet commentary on what a nuclear war might actually look like is highly ambivalent and imprecise. It is unnecessary to review in detail the various areas of conceptual fuzziness in Soviet military thought, but Soviet authorities do radiate distinctly unresolved feelings about such crucial but imponderable questions as how the war might be triggered in the first place, how long it might last, whether it would be

¹Lieutenant General I. Zavialov, "On Soviet Military Doctrine," *Krasnaia zvezda*, March 30, 1967.

containable at the conventional level, how rapidly it would escalate to theater nuclear operations, what dynamics the transition to intercontinental warfare would entail, and, most of all, what the endgame would look like in terms of American behavior and ultimate Soviet prospects for victory. Soviet military spokesmen have been consistently frustrated in their efforts to grapple with these issues since the beginnings of their discourse on strategic nuclear matters in the 1950s. Indeed, the unusual stridency of Soviet doctrinal assertions on such themes as superiority and preemption stems in considerable measure from these uncertainties about what the future might hold and reflects an effort to compensate at least partially through prudent overinsurance.

How such uncertainties might manifest themselves in Soviet crisis behavior and counsel either restraint or forceful action will be deferred for more extensive consideration later on. What needs emphasizing here is simply that whatever Soviet doctrine may say about the nature and requirements of modern war, any Soviet decision to use large-scale force would involve a substantial measure of guesswork, if only because the vagaries of conflict are ultimately transideological and because Soviet foresight is, in the end, no more amply endowed than anybody else's. The ultimate virtuosity of Soviet performance in any serious test of military strength would depend at least as much on how organizationally adept they were at adapting to challenges and opportunities as it would on any intrinsic merits of their previous concepts and preparations.

In practical terms, all doctrine does for Soviet planners, aside from prescribing broad guidelines for force procurement, is to indicate the various principles and modes of combat that would make the most sense in the best of conceivable operational worlds. Because of its irresolution about the precise contours a war might assume and its appreciation that things could go badly despite the best efforts of the leadership to control events, that doctrine scarcely offers a hard prediction of how the Soviets would actually respond or much comfort in the way of "instant courage" for Soviet strategic decisionmakers. On the contrary, its rhetorical toughness may represent as much a need to ease the burdens of uncertainty through wish fulfillment as any desire for strategic chest pounding in a nuclear life-or-death dilemma.

To suggest this, of course, is scarcely to deny the independent importance of doctrine as a reflection of underlying Soviet strategic logic or as a factor significantly affecting the way the Soviets go about their business of force development and modernization. Nor, most emphatically, is it to deprecate the threat to U.S. interests posed by recent Soviet military force improvements or to "excuse" them on the ground that they somehow constitute a legitimate outgrowth of Soviet strategic paranoia.² Nonetheless, we must be careful not to misread Soviet military doctrine as a categorical predictor of future Soviet strategic behavior. The Soviet armed

²This point warrants elaboration. Some analysts in the recent strategic debate have downplayed the significance of the post-Khrushchev Soviet buildup on the ground that it has been driven more by legitimate security concerns than by aggressive hegemonial ambitions. In the words of one such proponent, "the firmly-rooted Russian-Soviet sense of insecurity . . . has very likely bred a natural inclination to overcompensate and overinsure on security matters." Because of this underlying motivation, he argues, the resultant Soviet quest for strategic advantage "should not be interpreted in a totally offensive threatening light" and "need not be destabilizing if [properly] understood." Dennis Ross, "Rethinking Soviet Strategic Policy: Inputs and Implications," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1978, pp. 4-5. Pushed to the extreme, such formulas amount to apologetic pleas to "pity the poor Russians" because of their unfortunate historical experiences and cultural imperatives. This viewpoint may have certain logical attractions, but it totally ignores the severe consequences the fruits of perceived Soviet "insufficiency" can nonetheless have for vital Western interests. Whether or not recent Soviet policy has had overtly "aggressive" underpinnings, Moscow's insistence on forces capable of assuring absolute security for the Soviet Union necessarily implies an unacceptable condition of absolute insecurity for everybody else. It is one thing to explain Soviet strategic behavior as a manifestation of insecurity. It is something quite different to condone such behavior solely on the strength of the explanation. Whatever the motivations for continued Soviet force improvement may be, the capabilities for coercive diplomacy they permit can scarcely escape the concern of responsible Western defense planners.

services can readily accept injunctions regarding the need for large peacetime weapon inventories not only with equanimity but with outright enthusiasm so long as those injunctions do not impose an intolerable drain on available resources or provoke the United States into determined offsetting measures. Doctrinal insistence on massive preemption as the only reliable key to survival and victory, however, would probably have little ready acceptance in the crisis deliberations of political leaders ultimately responsible for basic decisions about war and peace. Those leaders would be disciplined by an appreciation of the severe opportunity costs of miscalculation and of the proclivities of best-laid plans to go astray.

III. RESTRAINT AND CAUTION IN SOVIET POLITICAL STYLE

Any effort to understand high-level Soviet thinking about the uses and limits of military power must look beyond narrow doctrinal materials to harder evidence from the record of Soviet conduct, which might indicate recurrent tendencies and norms of strategic behavior. This is a rough task even in the best of circumstances, as any analyst overwhelmed with data could attest in trying to explain *American* policy behavior over the years. In the Soviet case, the problem is compounded by the almost total lack of any reliable base of documentary information that might provide insight into the calculations underlying political decisionmaking at the highest levels of national leadership.

The very concept of "national style" is *controversial and laden with pitfalls*. It is extremely difficult to venture conclusive generalizations about the sources of a nation's behavior under stress, because of the multiplicity of causal factors at work. Even though one may perceive recurrent patterns in a country's conduct over time in roughly comparable crisis situations, the motivations for such apparent consistency may be strikingly dissimilar from case to case. Some seeming "constants" in the Soviet *modus operandi* may have ideological underpinnings, others might be culturally derived, and still others could stem from the unique institutional characteristics of the Soviet political system.

The Soviet Union now has a different leadership and a vastly more versatile military posture than it did during the decade of Khrushchev's incumbency, the period for which our evidence about Soviet crisis behavior is richest. Even though it might be possible to point toward characteristically "Soviet" modes of conduct in Khrushchev and Brezhnev alike, there has to be an explanation of how such common behavior could emanate from such dramatically different settings. Certainly Khrushchev was constrained militarily from many policy options in a way the Brezhnev regime is not, and Brezhnev's leadership style has been sufficiently unlike Khrushchev's blunderbuss approach to rule out glib explanations of commonality on the grounds that both came from a common background of "Bolshevik" upbringing.

Although Brezhnev's avowed "scientific" approach to leadership shows conservative tendencies wholly consistent with Khrushchev's rational loss-cutting after the Cuban crisis, it would be unfounded and extremely dangerous to assume that Brezhnev would respond in Khrushchevian fashion to a similar confrontation under present conditions of Soviet-American strategic parity. However correct it may be to describe Soviet foreign behavior as risk-averse in principle, such behavior is tied to perceived stakes and opportunities, and history is full of glaring exceptions that disproved the general rule. Future Soviet leaders might prove cautious in every situation except the one watershed confrontation that really mattered to Soviet interests. There are profound difficulties involved in trying to understand the enduring elements of Soviet strategic style without reducing the resultant image to a misleading and potentially harmful caricature.

Despite all this, one must approach the task of forecasting Soviet behavior under conditions of risk with at least some expectation of useful generalization, lest the record of past Soviet actions be dismissed as a mere collection of random events, something no reasonable analyst would recommend. It is imperative to pursue unifying patterns of Soviet conduct even in the face of methodological obstacles that severely restrict their predictive utility. As one of the more thoughtful specialists in the theory of national character analysis has maintained, "art

requires it even if the data do not impose it, and the need for such a concept in historical synthesis is so great that, if it did not exist, it would, like Voltaire's God, have to be invented." The central task, he adds, "is to separate academic and rational theories of national character from charismatic and mystical theories, and to do this rigorously and with finality."¹ This, in turn, requires painstaking historical research in addition to discriminating analysis, something obviously precluded by the scope of this report. For those interested in pursuing the question, a considerable body of literature on Soviet crisis comportment generally supports the notion that despite their frequent rhetorical excesses, Soviet political leaders have pursued risk-minimizing strategies more or less regardless of variations in the East-West military balance.² Like the operational prescriptions of Soviet doctrine, this apparent stylistic trait should be used sparingly as a basis for anticipating future Soviet performance. Like the ambiguities in Soviet doctrine, however, it provides useful clues illuminating general tendencies in Soviet behavior that can help refine our threat assessments by forcing us to examine the important sources of restraint and uncertainty that underlie and modulate Soviet power.

In his account of the Soviet political character written in the early 1950s, Nathan Leites advanced the proposition that when all the returns are examined, "the Politburo's question for any major operation is whether it is required or impermissible . . . rather than whether it is tough or easy."³ This proposition suggests a Soviet standard of behavior fundamentally unlike what most secular Westerners are accustomed to and touches the heart of the reason why the Soviets have apparently failed to develop sophisticated "theories" of coercive diplomacy comparable to those prevalent in U.S. strategic discourse. Although the Soviets have amply demonstrated their mastery of the politics of opportunism, they have avoided indiscriminate muscle flexing whenever the opportunity for doing so appeared superficially ripe. Instead, their tendency has been to talk tough as a matter of practice, yet to reserve actual intervention for cases in which they had supreme interests at stake, a high probability of U.S. noninvolvement, and a comfortable prospect of success with moderate investment of military capital.

Brezhnev's verbal threat-mongering but otherwise passivity in the wake of the Shah's overthrow in Iran in 1979 was plainly of a piece with this characteristic, as was Khrushchev's rocket-rattling during the Suez and Taiwan Straits crises, which reached peak intensity in each case only after it had become apparent that the real tension had subsided.⁴ Given this Soviet instinct to avoid meddling in areas where intervention could threaten to boomerang and to engage militarily only after carefully weighing the costs of inaction against the prospects for success with an economy of force, it is hardly surprising that the Soviet leaders were so perplexed at the piecemeal and ultimately disastrous American pattern of involvement in Southeast Asia. Although we can only guess at how they privately assessed U.S. military actions in Vietnam, everything we know about their philosophy of intervention suggests that they saw the initial U.S. decision to escalate as a headlong leap into a quagmire and the ultimate U.S. acceptance of defeat as a testament to our lack of "seriousness" about war, neither

¹David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*. University of Chicago Press, 1954, pp. 30-31.

²See, in particular, Hannes Adomeit, *Soviet Risk-Taking and Crisis Behavior: From Confrontation to Coexistence*, Adelphi Paper No. 101, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 1973; and Jan F. Triska and David D. Finley, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1968, pp. 310-349. See also Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Options*, The Rand Corporation, R-2154-AF, September 1977, pp. 13-15.

³Nathan Leites, *A Study of Bolshevism*, The Free Press, Glencoe, 1953, p. 34.

⁴On the latter two instances, see Stephen S. Kaplan, *Diplomacy of Power: Soviet Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1981, pp. 93-96 and 154-155.

of which they would be likely to countenance in their own military conduct. In contrast to U.S. experience, the Soviets have generally regarded military power primarily as a static guarantor of deterrence on terms congenial to Soviet diplomatic interests and only marginally as an instrument for underwriting adventures not deemed necessary for the preservation of fundamental Soviet security values.

What, then, of the Soviet decision to emplace ballistic missiles in Cuba in 1962? A critic of the thesis outlined above might argue that Khrushchev's gambit was precisely the sort of "harebrained scheme" his military detractors later accused him of concocting, as well as a provocative gesture totally out of keeping with the idea that Soviet conduct has been characteristically risk-averse and circumspect. A reasonable reply would be that Khrushchev's initial calculations were probably based on an honest belief that he could get away with his move, given the evidence of U.S. irresolution previously displayed in Vienna and at the Bay of Pigs, and that the real demonstration of Soviet crisis behavior came only after the U.S. imposition of a naval blockade made it clear that he had grossly underestimated the intensity of the American response.

The Soviet concept of security has always featured a prominent element of global expansionism at its core. Yet Soviet leaders from Lenin onward have repeatedly shown sublime faith that time is on their side. As a consequence, they have been reluctant to "push" history with blatant attempts to reap political gains on the cheap before the natural convergence of the right "objective conditions." In the case of the Cuban crisis, Khrushchev, in all likelihood, genuinely felt he had tested the waters and found them safe. Once he was rudely obliged to face the fact that the American commitment to getting the missiles out was far greater than his own interest in keeping them in, he immediately reverted to a strategy of prudent satisficing by withdrawing the offending weaponry in return for a face-saving U.S. guarantee not to invade the island.

In each phase, the initial deployment and the ultimate backdown alike, he acted with characteristic Soviet rationality, "pushing to the limit" (in Leites' formulation) where he perceived an opportunity to do so at low cost, yet yielding to U.S. resistance when he discovered, doubtless to his astonishment, that the game was not worth the candle. In the bill of particulars brought against him by his successors, his cardinal sin was probably not so much his failure to stand firm in the face of American opposition (which would have been gravely foolhardy in the circumstances) as his colossal misjudgment of the American temper that caused the Soviet Union to suffer such humiliation. In the Soviet system, no less than in the criminal underworld and other communities based on unmoderated power, mistakes of that magnitude are rarely forgiven, not so much for reasons of callous insensitivity but precisely because of the threat they pose to the institutions they represent.

A similar interpretation can be applied to more recent Soviet power projection activities. The current American defense debate has expressed concern over the possibility that Moscow's attainment of parity and its evident pursuit of more ambitious strategic goals may have engendered a concomitant growth in the Soviet Union's propensity to seek political gains from its newly acquired strategic assets. As evidence for such concern, proponents of this view have cited such examples as the Soviet Union's military involvement in Africa (and, more recently, Afghanistan) as disturbing manifestations of the Brezhnev regime's infatuation with the potential windfall benefits of "essential equivalence" and heightened willingness to tread hard on U.S. tolerance in pursuit of expanded global influence. This argument, however, misreads not only the specific nature of current Soviet military involvement in the Third World but also the character of Soviet thinking on the political role of strategic power in broader terms.

Although recent Soviet foreign activities reflect a substantial growth in Soviet political exuberance and self-confidence, none of the examples of Soviet interventionism typically in-

voked as proof of newfound Soviet inclination toward indulgence in global confrontation politics can be characterized as cavalier flirtations with risk or blatant provocations energized by an atypical disposition to invoke escalatory threats in order to enforce U.S. noninterference. Rather, they indicate little more than an enhanced Soviet penchant for moving into power vacuums where the United States has either withdrawn its own commitments or, because of domestic political constraints, has been disinclined to mount significant opposition. This is in no way to derogate the palpably expansionist Soviet hegemonial appetite they represent or to whitewash the spectacular unsteadfastness of U.S. foreign policy that has largely provided them with inspiration and opportunity for success. Yet however poorly these explanations may reflect on the recent record of American diplomatic comportment, they are far removed from any notion that Soviet conduct reflects willingness to engage in threats solely because of the changed strategic balance.

IV. POSSIBLE SOURCES OF SOVIET STRATEGIC ANXIETY AND DOUBT

Probably to its credit, the Soviet Union has never developed any refined theories about the manipulative use of strategic power in coercive diplomacy comparable to such widely publicized Western notions as "compellence," graduated escalation, and selective nuclear options. The Soviets have regarded these and related concepts as dangerous usurpations of the proper role of military power—namely, the prompt securing of objectives deemed essential to the national interest but unattainable through less extreme measures. As Soviet reluctance to commit forces beyond the immediate periphery of acknowledged Soviet hegemony attests, these sorts of objectives have, at least until now, remained extremely limited. These narrow circumstances (the Hungarian and Czechoslovak invasions of 1956 and 1968, the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969, and the current Afghanistan operation) have entailed what the Soviet leadership considers intolerable pressures on the Soviet Union's doorstep and have been distinguished by a very low probability of U.S. military opposition.

The caution that has tended to deliver Soviet leaders from indulging in military adventures of questionable strategic necessity or prospect for success would probably assert itself forcefully in a future confrontation in which direct superpower combat loomed as a serious possibility. It would also be reinforced by several important operational concerns regarding the many ways in which Soviet plans could become upset because of possible weaknesses in such areas as combat readiness, command and control integrity, alliance solidarity, and military morale. Such sources of hesitancy would be especially likely to counsel Soviet restraint in crises where the Soviet leaders were convinced that continued inaction or carefully measured exploratory probing, whatever their long-term political costs, would promise substantially less risk than proceeding with dramatic initiatives that could backfire in unexpected ways. Although it would be unwise to elevate this point to an axiom on the strength of only guarded extrapolation from past precedents, it seems reasonable to suggest that these elements of anxiety and uncertainty would exert a powerful self-detering influence on Soviet conduct in future crises short of one where Soviet decisionmakers were so convinced that major war was coming that *some* decisive preemptive move was required.

Any effort to divine the motivations of Soviet behavior in crises whose contours and stakes remain obscure must recognize that informed speculation constitutes the only available foundation for analytical projections and judgments. Even for potential situations where Soviet incentives, capabilities, and commitments can be reliably assumed in advance, this is an inherently risky business. The Soviets are no more bound by their past modes of action than any other political leaders throughout the world and are uniquely prone to approach-avoidance conflicts in crisis decisionmaking as a result of sharply divergent strains in their political culture, ideology, and doctrine. On the one hand, their offensive military orientation, their belief in the commanding importance of initiative at all levels of political life, and their compulsion to check undesirable trains of events before they become unmanageable incline them toward rejecting passivity and treating forceful preemption (not only in warfare but in all areas of decisionmaking) as the supreme measure of leadership vitality and rectitude. On the other hand, their faith in the inevitability of socialism, their abhorrence of momentary acts that might threaten to undo their existing gains, their tendency to draw sharp distinctions between the desirable and the necessary, and their associated sense of confidence that time is

on their side impose a powerful braking influence on their willingness to seek radical solutions when events might be safely left to continue for another day.

These conflicting pressures have saddled the Soviet leadership with systemic dilemmas that have probably been far more starkly defined and deeply felt than comparable influences governing the crisis decisionmaking of Western political leaders. Even in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, where perceived necessity and the local balance of forces strongly supported positive action and offered confident prospects for Soviet success, the decision to intervene was preceded by excruciating rumination over potential risks and costs, in which arguments for delaying were strong and the final choice was anything but foreordained.¹ In light of that experience, similar indecision could be expected to weigh on Soviet policymakers with vastly greater effect in any challenge where the Soviet Union stood at the brink of full-scale combat involvement with U.S. forces. In such a case, the preeminent Soviet concern would probably not be over the threat of a "credible first strike," or any of the other niceties of American strategic parlance, so much as over the more undifferentiated specter of "just plain war," to use Thomas Schelling's apt formulation.² Given this prospect, Soviet planning, at least initially, would probably emphasize identifying and evaluating those uncertainties about Soviet military performance and the possible interplay of uncontrollable external variables that would threaten the success of any Soviet option, rather than detailed force capabilities and exchange ratios in specific scenarios. At this level of policy deliberation, with the basic question of war or peace yet undecided, the weight of evidence from past Soviet behavior suggests that consideration of prospective operational gains would be overshadowed by contemplation of the various things that could go awry.

This is not to say that in all crises involving the threat of war with the United States, the Soviet leaders would invariably find themselves caught up in paralyzing irresolution and immobilism. Much would depend on the situation at hand, its geographic propinquity to Soviet lines of communication, its relevance to core Soviet security interests, and the balance between political stakes and military risks involved. Much would also hinge on authoritative Soviet assessments of U.S. attitudes and capabilities for concerted action. It is in this latter area where gross Soviet misperception of American determination to live up to avowed commitments could mislead the Soviets into potentially catastrophic courses of action that superficially appeared manageable. It is hard to imagine a case where such a sequence of misperceptions could immediately provoke a military showdown in Europe in the absence of considerable previous tension and conflict elsewhere. A guaranteed recipe for such a disaster could occur in some hotly contested region, such as the Persian Gulf, where the Soviets felt the changed military balance entitled them to returns denied them during their years of inferiority, and the United States claimed preeminence based on its successful performance in such past watershed confrontations as the Cuban crisis. In such a circumstance, both countries could find themselves locked on a collision course as a result of unwitting disagreement on the basic rules of the game.

The Chinese expression for crisis is a compound of the words danger and opportunity (*wei-chi*) and neatly captures the conundrum that would beset the Soviet leadership in contem-

¹In the case of Hungary, Khrushchev recounted that until the final decision to invade was consolidated within the Party Presidium, "I don't know how many times we changed our minds back and forth." *Khrushchev Remembers*. Little, Brown, and Company, Boston, 1970, p. 148. As for Czechoslovakia, Brezhnev related after the event that one major concern among diverse Politburo members was that "this step would threaten the authority of the Soviet Union in the eyes of the people of the world." Jiri Valenta, *Soviet Intervention in Czechoslovakia, 1968: Anatomy of a Decision*. Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1979, p. 142.

²Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1966, pp. 98-99.

plating any direct use of military force against the United States. Obviously they would feel conflicting pressures toward boldness and caution. Their choice would probably hinge as much on what they thought they could get away with as on any detailed assessment of their comparative strategic strengths.

Nonetheless, in any Soviet-American confrontation in which escalation to major war appeared possible, Soviet deliberations would be strongly influenced by a number of concerns that are muted during routine peacetime activities. Without specific scenarios, no one can say which of these concerns would dominate Soviet planning or in what precise ways they would manifest themselves in the decisionmaking process. However, there are some indications of their scope and content as they might appear to Soviet political and military leaders during such a crisis.

The following remarks will survey some of the uncertainties that could generate serious worry in the minds of Soviet strategic decisionmakers if they embarked on a potentially catastrophic course, yet still commanded some initiative and could make the outcome go either way. These considerations should be read neither as confident forecasts of Soviet caution in all circumstances nor as an exhaustive account of every conceivable source of worry that could counsel restraint in Soviet crisis behavior. Rather, they should be regarded as an abbreviated checklist of fears that could arise in any circumstance in which Soviet military forces might actually be called upon to fight. Some of them involve straightforward inferences from past Soviet behavior. Others derive from signals the Soviets radiate through the comments and cautionary notes that have long pervaded their military literature on such matters as command virtuosity, troop management, and operational readiness. Although these anxieties scarcely vitiate the importance of doctrinal verities or diminish the seriousness with which these articles of Soviet faith should be viewed in Western contingency planning, they nonetheless suggest that Soviet elites are haunted by fears of inadequacy and failure and are far less cocksure than an isolated reading of their doctrinal professions might indicate.

OPERATIONAL CAPABILITIES OF SOVIET FORCES

Apart from uncertainty about such poorly understood aspects of weapons phenomenology as electromagnetic pulse and fratricide and other technical imponderables of strategic force performance that afflict all nuclear states, the Soviet leadership probably senses a whole range of unique deficiencies in its arsenal that are unobservable to the West yet loom large in Soviet planning. Lacking anything but the most fragmentary data, we can do little here beyond merely highlighting the existence of this awareness and its relevance as a factor bearing on Soviet contingency planning. Just to cite one example, we assume that Soviet defense authorities command fairly accurate knowledge of their ICBM force's technical reliability as a result of their extensive experience with operational training launches.³ We are necessarily less certain about the degree of confidence that knowledge inspires, but it may be less than completely comforting to decisionmakers who are obliged to worry about worst cases and would have to shoulder the political responsibility for their mistakes. Various sources indicate that ostensibly "no-notice" Soviet operational readiness inspections are carefully stage-managed so that all participants earn high marks for performance.⁴ If this practice is widespread

³Unlike the United States, the Soviet Union routinely conducts ICBM tests and training firings from operational silos. As of early 1974, it had carried out approximately one hundred such launches. See Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report, FY 1975*, March 4, 1976, p. 56.

⁴See Herbert Goldhamer, *The Soviet Soldier: Soviet Military Management at the Troop Level*, Crane, Russak, and Company, New York, 1975, pp. 116-124.

throughout the Soviet military, it provides Soviet planners not only with a good feel for what their forces can do under controlled peacetime conditions, but also grounds for legitimate concern about the degradations they could encounter in a combat situation marked by confusion and a requirement for improvising under duress. If global war appeared a foregone conclusion, such uneasiness might counsel prompt preemption while adequate time remained to bring Soviet forces to full readiness under the cover of secrecy. In most situations, however, it would more likely engender profound distress reminiscent of Khrushchev's legendary "smell of burning in the air" at the height of the Cuban crisis.⁵ Professional soldiers, if not their civilian superiors, are the least confident of their preparedness the closer they edge toward war. Such foreboding would probably afflict Soviet military decisionmakers with as much intensity as it would comparable military elites the world over.

Similar sorts of brooding, easily sublimated in peacetime yet difficult to suppress in crises, might also surface in connection with Soviet nonnuclear forces. Despite their extensive investment in air defense assets, we know from the testimony of Lieutenant Victor Belenko that the Soviets have little confidence in the ability of their front-line interceptors to deal with the U.S. low-altitude bomber threat.⁶ For many force categories, Soviet planners may not have developed certain theoretically feasible employment options occasionally attributed to them in worst-case Western threat assessments, such as the use of medium-range bombers on one-way missions against the United States. In his memoirs, Khrushchev graphically recounted the derision that met proposals to have the BISON recover in Mexico from bombing missions against U.S. targets, casting some suspicion on recent intimations that the BACKFIRE might be slated for similar one-way missions terminating in Cuba.⁷

These and other indicators of possible doubt in Soviet appraisals of their military capabilities are, of course, merely straws in the wind and scarcely constitute conclusive evidence of significant shortcomings in Soviet perceptions of their military strengths and liabilities. All the same, they remind us that Soviet decisionmakers know themselves far better than we know them and are thus likely to be far more sensitive to their operational inadequacies than they are given credit for. How these perceived inadequacies would affect Soviet crisis behavior would depend on Soviet judgments about the nature of the strategic imperatives. They could never be completely ignored and might constitute major factors counseling restraint when the necessity for decisive action had not been clearly established in the minds of the Soviet leaders.

OPERATIONAL CAPABILITIES OF U.S. FORCES

Just as we may tend to exaggerate Soviet strengths, so may the Soviets exaggerate ours, and these tendencies may be exacerbated in their influence on Soviet planning by corporate paranoia, historically rooted feelings of inferiority, and a natural proclivity to project Soviet instincts toward concealment and deception onto adversaries. Henry Kissinger has likened both superpowers to "heavily armed blind men feeling their way around a room, each believing

⁵"Khrushchev's Report on the International Situation," *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, Vol. 14, No. 51, January 16, 1963, p. 7.

⁶John Barron, *MiG Pilot*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1980, p. 72.

⁷On the matter of the BISON, Khrushchev noted: "This plane failed to satisfy our requirements. It could reach the United States, but it couldn't come back. Myasischev [the designer] said the Mya-4 could bomb the United States and then land in Mexico. We replied to that idea with a joke: 'What do you think Mexico is—our mother-in-law? You think we can simply go calling anytime we want? The Mexicans would never let us have the plane back.'" *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, Little, Brown, and Company, Boston, 1974, p. 39.

himself in mortal peril from the the other whom he assumes to have perfect vision."⁸ This characterization not only reflects our own occasional urge to overstate unpleasant turns of Soviet behavior as components of a coherent "master plan" but also reflects both countries' tendency to view their opponent's strategic developments in the gloomiest possible light while deprecating or forgetting their own considerable advantages in the process. The Soviets have deep respect and admiration for American technological prowess, which contributes to a Soviet perspective on U.S. military R&D at odds with their general contempt for Western strategic doctrine and values. As a consequence, Soviet threat assessments could well be colored by an unconscious propensity to attribute larger-than-life performance capabilities to American military forces.

At first glance, such a suggestion runs counter to the popular notion that because of the vast dissimilarities between American and Soviet societies, the Soviets enjoy the twin advantages of secrecy to cloak their own operational deficiencies from Western intelligence purview and freedom to scrutinize every detail of U.S. strategic capabilities like an open book. But Moscow's image of American power resulting from this so-called "informational asymmetry" is not nearly so confidence-inspiring as this stark depiction would have us believe. Much has been made in recent years about the amount of damaging military data we freely provide the Soviets through such open sources as annual Posture Statements, Congressional testimony, technical journals, and press reports. As a result of this hemorrhage of information, so the argument goes, it would take an obtuse Soviet observer indeed not to be able to piece together a mosaic of U.S. programs, capabilities, and plans with a degree of exactitude that Western analysts are only rarely capable of replicating for the Soviet Union even with the most rigorous and sophisticated intelligence collection techniques.

Although the difficulty of protecting military information in a democratic society is a legitimate concern of U.S. defense planners and doubtless exacts some toll in the effectiveness of the American military posture, there are plausible grounds for wondering whether it provides advantages to those Soviet officials responsible for keeping track of American force posture developments. The Soviet political-military bureaucracy is highly compartmentalized and stratified, and unimpeded data flow is anything but routine. Given the pervasiveness of an acute "left hand knoweth not" syndrome throughout the Soviet defense community, one can fairly ask whether the evaluation network is sufficiently integrated to filter the information available about U.S. capabilities to draw relevant connections. The Soviet intelligence subculture has long been known to harbor profound distrust of open-source material on the grounds that it could constitute purposely distorted "disinformation." Instead, it has tended to rely on hard-copy data secured through classic espionage channels as the only authoritative sources of insight into enemy capabilities and plans. Coupled with Moscow's traditional stress on uprooting enemy "secrets" as the ultimate proof of intelligence virtuosity and the KGB's reputed disdain for analysis (which a former Soviet officer dismissed as "a job for lieutenants and women"), this trait raises the possibility that the Soviet Union may be far less effective in assimilating evidence about U.S. strengths and weaknesses than the darker fears of some Americans might suggest.⁹

If there is any truth to this hypothesis, high-level Soviet defense authorities may perceive U.S. capabilities as being far less imperfect than we are characteristically inclined to regard

⁸Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years*, Little, Brown, and Company, Boston, 1979, p. 552.

⁹According to one authoritative account, although "the KGB strives to verify the authenticity of stolen documents and the accuracy of agent reports," it completely lacks "any independent body of professional analysts who attempt to distill the underlying meaning and import from intelligence." John Barron, *KGB: The Secret Work of Soviet Secret Agents*, Reader's Digest Press, New York, 1974, pp. 76-77.

them. To note only one possible example, the Soviets are probably less impressed by the much-heralded "Minuteman vulnerability problem" than most U.S. defense analysts, because they appear to maintain considerable faith in hardened silos to protect their own ICBMs and show little sign of concern—at least yet—about seeking new basing modes to accommodate the impending hard-target capabilities of MX and Trident. If Soviet force planners and decision-makers derive any political comfort at all from this impending U.S. liability, it is probably far more from official U.S. expressions of anxiety than from independent technical evaluations of their own strategic counterforce capabilities. They, like ourselves, tend to be fixated by a variant of worst-case projection in their contingency planning. It is thus probable that their own uncertainties about how successful a Soviet disarming attack might be, rather than any reassurance from U.S. nervousness about Minuteman survivability, would play the commanding role in any Soviet consideration of the first-strike option in a crisis.

The net effect of this Soviet approach to threat assessment is far from congenial to U.S. security interests as far as peacetime force planning is concerned, because it probably accelerates rather than moderates Soviet R&D and force improvement activities. Yet during a grave crisis in which the Soviet Union's basic national livelihood lay at risk, it could induce caution rather than boldness in military initiatives that could backfire catastrophically in the event of serious miscalculation. The broad chasm that frequently separates perceptions of Soviet capability on the part of professional intelligence specialists from the more basic images held by senior government officials is a characteristic phenomenon of American defense politics.¹⁰ In the Soviet Union, such disparity is probably even more pronounced because of the rigid compartmentation and hierarchical structure of the Soviet policy planning apparatus. Accordingly, senior party authorities who would be held responsible for gross errors of judgment in a crisis would probably be more disposed to give U.S. capabilities the benefit of the doubt than would intelligence analysts commanding a more finely grained appreciation of known deficiencies in the U.S. military posture.

AMERICAN RATIONALITY UNDER PRESSURE

One of the more ironic sources of Soviet hesitation in past times of East-West tension has been deep bewilderment at the erratic and often cryptic character of American political-military conduct. As a result of their ideological convictions and the abiding constancy of purpose they have inspired, the Soviet leaders have come to follow a definite logic in their own political behavior over the years and to acquire a rather clear set of derivative expectations about the notional forms of international comportment their "capitalist" adversaries ought to observe. Just as conservative Western analysts have been tempted to interpret the most unconnected Soviet moves as parts of a coherent "grand design," so the Soviets have had their own compulsions to perceive all facets of U.S. foreign policy behavior as being unswervingly and purposefully inimical to Soviet security interests. When this conduct has failed to resonate with Moscow's idealized image of capitalist self-interest (a reverse projection of Bolshevik rationality), it has had unsettling effects on the Soviet leaders closely akin to the psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance.

¹⁰As Henry Kissinger has observed, "One of the key problems of contemporary national security policy is the ever-widening gap that has opened up between the sophistication of technical studies and the capacity of an already overworked leadership group to absorb their intricacy." Quoted in E. S. Quade and W. I. Boucher (eds.), *Systems Analysis and Policymaking: Applications in Defense*. American Elsevier Publishing Company, New York, 1968, p. v.

It has long been a familiar cliché that the Soviets would prefer to deal with hardcore Wall Street bankers than romantic liberals in their diplomatic relations with the United States, because the former are at least conditioned to act in the predictable fashion Soviet apparatchiks are schooled to expect. Liberals, by contrast, have frequently adopted policies out of phase with Soviet expectations and thus highly perplexing in their underlying sources and motivations. Such periodic instances of inconsistency and vacillation in U.S. behavior during the Carter years directly occasioned the doubtless genuine Soviet press expressions of frustration over the so-called "zigs and zags" of U.S. foreign policy and probably fostered uncertainty in the minds of Soviet leaders about how the United States might respond to future Soviet policy initiatives. Despite the embarrassment of riches nominally available to Soviet intelligence collectors and analysts, the Soviet estimator responsible for forecasting future U.S. behavior probably has no easier lot than his American counterpart.

The implications of this image of U.S. policy style for Soviet crisis planners are almost surely not encouraging and are quite likely to reinforce the Soviet leadership's natural instincts toward caution and risk-avoidance. Not only the Soviets but frequently our European allies as well have had occasion to regard the United States as a dinosaur in its foreign policy behavior, requiring extraordinary affronts to its sensibilities to become aroused and then lashing out reflexively. The seeming ease with which the United States invoked undisguised threats of nuclear war during the Cuban crisis in response to what the Soviets probably saw as a reasonable and incremental strategic initiative was but one illustration of U.S. proclivities toward self-destruction as interpreted by Soviet authorities, which could give the Soviets pause in future confrontations of comparable magnitude. Concern over the real-world uncertainty of American comportment in a rational and self-interested manner when enlightened common sense dictated restraint or acquiescence could profoundly temper Soviet decisionmaking about whether to cross the nuclear threshold, or whether to use large-scale force at all, in a crisis involving core Soviet national interests.

Although Soviet doctrinal writings have long waxed confident about the tactical virtues of massive preemption at the edge of war, their associated image of "victory" (both theater and intercontinental) has hinged on the assumption that the United States would be unable or unwilling to muster an effective retaliation. If the Soviets have been reassured in their strategic planning by the notion that nothing succeeds like success, they cannot have escaped appreciating the collateral axiom that nothing fails like failure. Their doctrinal refrain that nuclear weapons now permit the achievement of fundamental strategic aims at the very outset of an unrestricted war ultimately entails making a virtue out of necessity, for it almost requires those objectives to be attained as a precondition of meaningful victory. The rational response for the United States in the wake of a highly successful Soviet disarming attack against U.S. strategic forces would almost have to be a rejection of massive counter-city retaliation in favor of using surviving U.S. forces to try and bargain for a reasonably acceptable postwar settlement from an unfortunate position of severe military disadvantage.¹¹ Yet it is far from clear that a U.S. leadership driven by confusion, desperation, and inflamed passion for revenge would choose (or be able) to exercise such supremely disciplined self-control in the aftermath of a devastating Soviet attack.

In the unlikely case that U.S. unpredictability caused the Soviets to be concerned that the United States might initiate the large-scale use of nuclear weapons, the Soviet urge to preempt

¹¹For further development of this point, see Nathan Leites, *Once More About What We Should Not Do Even in the Worst Case: The Assured Destruction Attack*, California Seminar on Arms Control and Foreign Policy, Santa Monica, July 1974.

would probably overwhelm any arguments for hesitancy. Such action would guarantee at least a modicum of Soviet national survival. In most circumstances, however, the Soviets would have little cause to fear such a U.S. move (at least at the intercontinental-war level), and any Soviet decision to preempt would have to account for the possibility that the United States might execute the countervalue portion of the SIOP—or worse yet, launch the entire component of its nonreserve nuclear forces under assessment of incoming attack—with all the consequences such a possibility would imply for Soviet prospects for success. Even though such a U.S. response under conditions of adversity might leave the Soviet Union with a favorable exchange outcome in purely military terms, Soviet decisionmakers would have to inquire whether such an outcome would constitute any practical “victory” worth having, given the greater rewards that would accrue from not triggering such devastation in the first place.

At the height of the Vietnam war, President Nixon remarked that the United States had a vested interest in cultivating an external image of unpredictability.¹² Carried to extremes, such an attitude could risk provoking just the sort of Soviet impulsiveness it was intended to prevent. Within limits, however, U.S. efforts to exploit the “rationality of irrationality” principle by stressing the inevitability of retaliation and alluding periodically to launch-on-warning as a last-ditch nuclear option could reinforce deterrence, so long as they were not substituted for continued investments in U.S. strategic capability. The most ardent American enthusiasts of “assured destruction” might doubt whether such a threat would actually be consummated, but there is enough evidence in Soviet assessments of past U.S. behavior suggesting that things could go the other way to make Soviet first-strike proponents unsure about testing their luck. Soviet doctrine may emphasize the principles of surprise, momentum, and victory, but it does not commit Soviet leaders to modes of action that would go against common sense. Insofar as the Soviets can not *count* on U.S. passivity in situations where logic would suggest it as the only sensible alternative, their doctrinal rhetoric must provide them cold comfort at best.

THE DANGER OF DISORIENTATION AND DERAILMENT

Nathan Leites has observed that “Bolsheviks intensely fear their own disposition toward fear.”¹³ Although this assessment was ventured during the 1950s when inferiority and enemy encirclement was the entirety of Soviet historical experience, it remains valid even in the current era of nuclear equivalence and continues to explain much of the Soviet Union’s distinctive style of military behavior. Much of the surface bravado in Soviet doctrinal commentary can be read as reaction against Moscow’s feelings of insecurity and doubt, as can the “gigantism” of Soviet weapons programs stressing physical size and brute force (exemplified by the SS-18) and the pursuit of quantitative abundance in armored vehicles and tactical fighter aircraft, which would sustain high attrition in modern combat. Indeed, almost every major feature of Soviet doctrine, arms acquisition, and manpower recruitment lends itself

¹²After his departure from office, the former President expanded this point into a general principle of strategic diplomacy: “International relations are a lot like poker—stud poker with a hole card. . . . Our only covered card is the will, nerve, and unpredictability of the President—his ability to make the enemy think twice about raising the ante. . . . If the adversary feels that you are unpredictable, even rash, he will be deterred from pressing you too far. . . . We should not make statements that we will never launch a preemptive strike. Whether or not we would ever exercise that option, we should always leave open the possibility that in extreme circumstances we might.” Richard M. Nixon, *The Real War*, Warner Books, New York, 1980, pp. 253-256.

¹³Leites, *A Study of Bolshevism*, p. 38.

to partial explanation as evidence of Soviet overinsurance against the possibility of wartime events unfolding in unexpected ways.

To a certain extent, such concerns are generic to all military commanders regardless of their ideology or political culture. They are particularly influential in Soviet planning, however, because of the Soviet Union's express adherence to an operational doctrine that relies so heavily on initiative and surprise. It is not uncommon to encounter expressions of mild resentment in Western military circles over the Soviet Union's apparent luxury to choose the time and complexion of any war it might fight. Yet along with that luxury goes a burden of responsibility unique to holders of offensively oriented doctrines to weigh the prewar situation with extraordinary prescience, because the chances of success are heavily bound up with the correctness of planning assumptions; and opportunities for regrouping and trying again, particularly in the nuclear age, will be few and far between. Countries on the receiving end that are politically bound to defensive and reactive strategies have options for flexibility generally denied to those who would start a war. In many cases, the defender would need only be capable of disrupting the attacker's designs to forestall defeat.

None of this has been lost on the Soviets, and evidence of the latent unease it inspires can be found across a broad range of Soviet military writing and planning activity. Soviet articles on military training and troop management brood over the danger of *rasteriannost'* ("losing one's bearings") in the heat of battle.¹⁴ Concern over getting caught up in a train of events that cannot be controlled (and over starting something that cannot be confidently concluded) has long preoccupied Soviet commanders and political officers. This respect for the corrosive influence that uncontrolled events could exert on leadership voluntarism was neatly captured in a high-level Soviet political injunction over a decade ago to the effect that "the time has long passed when a general could direct his troops while standing on a hill."¹⁵ It goes far toward explaining the unusual stress on redundancy in the Soviet command and control infrastructure. It also accounts for much of the preoccupation shown by Soviet commanders and training officers over the difficulty of maintaining adequate motivation and discipline among rank-and-file troops to endure the dislocations that would attend any battlefield use of nuclear weapons. There is little indication of Soviet concern over the political loyalty of the armed forces (even though that loyalty may attach more to national than to party symbols), but there is ample evidence of Soviet uncertainty over the extent to which those forces could sustain adequate performance levels under conditions of unprecedented duress. As a consequence, routine training patterns show signs of an acutely felt need to assure such performance in the event of war through peacetime psychological conditioning and example-setting.¹⁶

This preoccupation, of course, has origins running back to the earliest days of the Bolshevik revolution and has persisted as a dominant theme in Soviet military education ever since. The "quality of commanders" figured prominently among Stalin's five "permanently operating factors" affecting the outcome of war,¹⁷ and inspirational combat leadership remains a critical

¹⁴A representative example of this fixation may be seen in the remark by Army General Pavlovskii that a major objective in the training of officers must be to ensure that "they do not lose their bearings when events develop unfavorably." *Krasnaia zvezda*, February 13, 1974. Also pertinent is the following editorial comment that "of active deeds in battle, capable above all is the man who knows how to subdue not only the feeling of fear—that assertion is hardly distinctive—but also the feeling of *rasteriannost'*." *Krasnaia zvezda*, January 24, 1974.

¹⁵Major General V. Zemskov, "An Important Factor for Victory in War." *Krasnaia zvezda*, January 5, 1967.

¹⁶A detailed and sophisticated marshalling of evidence from Soviet source materials bearing on this concern may be found in Nathan Leites, "What Soviet Commanders Fear from Their Own Forces," The Rand Corporation, P-5958, May 1978.

¹⁷The other four included the stability of the rear, the morale of the army, the quantity and quality of divisions, and the armament of the army. For discussion, see Herbert S. Dinerstein, *War and the Soviet Union*, Praeger, New York, 1962, pp. 6-8; and Raymond L. Garthoff, *Soviet Military Doctrine*, The Free Press, Glencoe, 1953, pp. 34-35.

precondition of victory in the current Soviet litany of operational desiderata. As early as the 1930s, Soviet training doctrine depicted "political steadfastness and moral attitudes" as indispensable ingredients of operational effectiveness and affirmed the vital importance of assuring that "whatever the difficulties, the army knows what it is fighting for."¹⁸ As a consequence, much of the party's political work in the armed forces has been directed less at fulfilling watchdog roles (as is often assumed in the West) than toward the "internalization of civic virtue" among troops that would bear the brunt of losses in combat.¹⁹

Unfortunately for Soviet planners, merely recognizing the importance of discipline and pursuing measures to instill it can provide little assurance that the results will weather the test of war, particularly one in which nuclear weapons might be involved. The Soviets harp about *military morale*, yet fear losing it just when it would be most urgently needed. Their reported policy of whole-unit replacement in the event of major battlefield losses to nuclear effects testifies to their determination to avoid contaminating fresh troops with the depression and resignation that would afflict the survivors of any such catastrophe.²⁰ Nonetheless, despite their efforts to inculcate strong moral fiber among their troops and their associated measures to contain the more corrosive effects of nuclear shock on unit performance, the specter of confusion, defeatism, and even mass desertion must be an enduring source of uncertainty to any Soviet commander or decisionmaker who would have to count on Soviet ground forces to secure victory.

A related malaise that periodically crops up in Soviet military writing concerns the perils of overconfidence and the danger that inadequate circumspection and flexibility at the threshold of war could draw the Soviet Union into a military cul-de-sac from which graceful extrication would be all but impossible. Western analysts often miss this and look solely to the surface manifestations of doctrine for insight into Soviet assumptions and expectations. Although it is hardly a routine theme in Soviet discourse on operational matters, one can find warnings about the dangers of *shapkozakidatelstvo* (or misplaced belief in the prospect of an easy victory) in Soviet military writings to demonstrate that the Soviets do not necessarily believe in the self-fulfilling quality of their doctrinal prescriptions. Notwithstanding a recent U.S. article on Soviet strategy that attracted widespread attention and controversy, the Soviet leadership no more confidently "thinks it can fight and win a nuclear war" than its American counterpart or anybody else.²¹ It is a far cry from Soviet traditional military thought to say that Soviet defense officials are so assured they contemplate threats against bedrock U.S. interests in cases other than those where Soviet survival lay equally at risk. Even in dire emergencies where "striking first in the last resort" was the Soviet leadership's least miserable option for attempting to control rapidly unravelling events, Soviet deliberation over such a decision would still be dominated by doubt about the future of the socialist vision.

At almost every level of conventional force employment, Soviet commentary emphasizes the critical importance of such intangibles as leadership, awareness, and flexibility, none of which can be counted on in adequate measure at the proper time. It is common to find criticisms of commanders who allow their crews to train repetitively in stereotyped scenarios where targets, terrain features, and the disposition of the "enemy" are all well known in advance, yet

¹⁸V. K. Triandafillov, *Kharakter operatsii sovremennykh armii* (The Operational Character of Modern Armies), Voenizdat, Moscow, 1932, pp. 50-63.

¹⁹Timothy J. Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1979, p. 71.

²⁰See Colonel A. A. Sidorenko, *The Offensive*, Voenizdat, Moscow, 1970, translated and published by the U.S. Air Force, p. 143.

²¹Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary*, Vol. 64, No. 1, July 1977.

who persuade themselves that their impressive results would be repeated in a combat environment.²² Whether comparable concerns attach to higher-level exercises involving nuclear forces is not ascertainable from open Soviet writings, but it would scarcely be surprising given the Soviet penchant for training across the board in highly routine and unimaginative ways. Soviet commanders at all echelons seem well aware of their deficiencies in peacetime troop performance, which must inspire some doubt in their confidence in Soviet readiness, if only because of recurrent exhortations to do better.

A final source of uncertainty worth considering involves the appreciation by many Soviet commanders of the potential cost of overcentralization that pervades the Soviet armed forces from the General Staff down to field units. This uncertainty is closely linked with the broader problems associated with the Soviet Union's offensively oriented doctrine discussed above. Potential setbacks could require prompt readjustment of plans if initial expectations were to prove misfounded. The Soviet command structure is stratified almost to ossification, with each echelon highly dependent on authority from above and little allowance provided for initiative and independent judgment at lower levels. This hierarchical quality of Soviet military life affects planning and operations in equal measure and heavily influences overall Soviet military performance. It has the virtue of providing an environment in which roles and missions are carefully allocated in advance and plans can be put into operation with maximum orderliness and singularity of purpose.

Unfortunately, this unique strength can also constitute a paralyzing weakness when command and control links have become broken, original plans have been derailed, and improvisation becomes required in order to salvage some measure of control from a rapidly eroding situation. As long as events continue to unfold as anticipated, centralization and command integration can compensate for insufficiencies in the more tangible ingredients of military power. Yet highly orchestrated and technically elegant war plans requiring careful coordination and timing for mission effectiveness have had a rich historical record of becoming snarled beyond repair.²³ In the face of such a possibility, one of the least likely sources of versatility and strength would be to have principals on the front line who had been programmed never to think for themselves.

A glimpse of the penalties that can ensue from such overcentralization and inflexibility was displayed in the July 1970 air battle between Soviet and Israeli pilots over the Suez Canal, in which five MiG-21s were destroyed with no Israeli losses in an intense engagement lasting less than five minutes. The day before, Soviet-flown MiGs had attacked and damaged an Israeli A-4 on a deep interdiction sortie near the Egyptian airfield at Inchas. The Israelis sought retribution by launching a diversionary feint. As expected, the MiGs rose to the bait and were promptly engaged by eight Israeli F-4s and Mirages. As described in various published accounts, the Soviet formation rapidly broke up into confusion and chaos once the first MiG was shot down. Throughout the engagement, the Soviets showed little evidence of air combat proficiency or air

²²A candid illustration may be seen in the following comment by the Soviet air commander for the North Caucasus Military District: "Once we investigated a case where a team of experienced pilots carried out a bombing mission which was rated very low. . . . In this case, the pilots had been flying the same routes for a long time and had only worked out the combat problems for their own range under normal target conditions. They did not work out the tactical background. In training, the pilots imitating the target fly only on a straight line, without changing altitude or speed. . . . These people are assuming that the simulated enemy air defense system has been destroyed, but they have simply not thought out the situation. How can someone go into real combat without the necessary skills?" Lieutenant General of Aviation G. Pavlov, "The Inexhaustible Reserve," *Krasnaia zvezda*, August 4, 1976.

²³Particularly notable in this regard are the well-known failures of the German Schlieffen Plan and the British amphibious assault on Gallipoli during World War I, both of which involved elaborate schemes that were impressive in concept yet foundered in execution because of various deficiencies in leadership. See B. H. Liddell-Hart, *The Real War, 1914-1918*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, pp. 46-49 and 159-174.

discipline. Having presumably been trained solely for radar intercepts against passive targets under close GCI control, they simply found themselves out of their element once they became unexpectedly caught in a hard-maneuvering visual fight in which the initiative was no longer theirs.²⁴

Naturally, one must guard against overgeneralization from such an isolated and microscopic example. Yet the inflexibilities that caused those Soviet aircrews to experience such a rude lesson in tactical surprise were precisely of the sort that regularly elicit criticism throughout Soviet military articles on operational training to this day. Such criticism is particularly visible in Soviet commentary on matters pertaining to pilot training, but it addresses a cultural trait that probably exists to some degree at all levels of Soviet military activity and constitutes one of the most deep-seated weaknesses of the Soviet armed forces.

Ironically, although Soviet commanders appear aware of this problem and its potential costs in the event of war, they seem unable to correct it, thus confirming the persistence of the centralization that produced the problem in the first place. In the case of tactical aviation, one can cite any number of articles urging aircrews to exercise "initiative" and to train in operationally realistic conditions. Yet parallel injunctions emphasize the need for meeting training objectives "according to the book" and threaten severe disciplinary sanctions for errors of judgment, which any realistic training regimen will produce on occasion.

OTHER UNCERTAINTIES

The sources of uncertainty and doubt in Soviet planning and operational readiness examined above apply mainly to questions affecting the performance of Soviet forces and command structures under the acute strains that would accompany any superpower showdown involving risk of major war. They encompass those concerns that would most immediately bedevil high-level Soviet planners tasked with recommending whether, when, and how to commit Soviet forces to major actions involving danger of nuclear escalation.

Beyond these operational-tactical sources of hesitancy in Soviet crisis deliberations is an even broader array of prospective nightmares that might give equal or greater pause to civilian leaders. Each higher-order concern could be extensively explored in a separate inquiry into the psychology of the Soviet leaders in situations involving grave risk to the continued vitality of their political stewardship. This discussion merely identifies them and briefly indicates how they might constrain Soviet leadership assertiveness at the brink of nuclear war.

Appreciation of Soviet Combat Inexperience

Until the current Afghanistan affair, the Soviet armed forces had never actually fought on any respectable scale in their entire postwar history. Their only significant deployment had been against neighboring "allies" in policing actions involving little risk of military opposition. Soviet spokesmen have gone to remarkable lengths in recent years in expressing grudging admiration of the operational seasoning the U.S. armed forces acquired in Vietnam and the Israelis gained in their various combat trials in the Middle East.²⁵ The Soviet Union, for better

²⁴For a rare first-hand account of this engagement, see Zeev Schiff, *A History of the Israeli Army*. Straight Arrow Books, San Francisco, 1974, pp. 199-202. Additional details may be found in "Israel: Preparing for the Next Round," *Air Enthusiast*, Vol. I, No. 7, December 1971, p. 344.

²⁵See Drew Middleton, "Soviet Officers Said to Admire American Army," *New York Times*, December 19, 1977.

or worse, has enjoyed no comparable opportunity to test its mettle against a determined adversary since its triumph over Nazi Germany in the Great Fatherland War. Although the Afghanistan episode may yet remind the Soviets what it means to live with long casualty lists on a daily basis, it is scarcely likely to provide much of an opportunity for gauging how Soviet forces would perform in high-intensity combat against a technologically sophisticated adversary such as the United States and NATO. Undoubtedly the Soviets have gained some instructive baseline data about operational resource management through their various power-projection activities in recent years, but there is a clear limit beyond which these fringe experiences (and such routine peacetime practices as summer training exercises) cannot replicate the demands and uncertainties of sustained military conflict. As for full-blown intercontinental war, notwithstanding the confident proclamations of Soviet declaratory doctrine, the Soviet Union has experienced no more exposure to nuclear combat than any of its adversaries. One should not make more of this point than it deserves, but it must constitute a distinct question mark in the minds of Soviet decisionmakers, especially those who do not routinely concern themselves with military matters. Indeed, it may even assume heightened significance if the Soviet Union eventually proves to be as inept at counterinsurgency warfare in Afghanistan as the United States seems to have been in Southeast Asia.²⁶

Concern over Premature Nuclear Weapons Release

The Soviets make at least as much an obsession over nuclear weapons control as their American counterparts. The alert rate of Soviet nuclear forces is generally believed to be far lower than our own.²⁷ In the Warsaw Pact forward area, nuclear weapons may not even be collocated with, let alone mated to, their delivery systems in peacetime conditions.²⁸ Even for periods of tension, it is far from clear what measures might threaten to remove nuclear weapons from the direct supervision of the Soviet national command authorities. During the Cuban crisis, for example, it was never clear whether nuclear warheads were actually emplaced on the island alongside the missiles.²⁹ In peacetime, responsibility for nuclear weapons security is reportedly not assigned to operational commands but instead is vested in the KGB, an independent civilian institution.³⁰

These and related indicators, however fragmentary, suggest that Soviet nuclear arms are certainly not poised on a hair trigger. On the contrary, the Soviet nuclear inventory appears to be securely disciplined by party authority, leading to a reasoned doubt about how flexibly

²⁶See Kenneth H. Bacon, "Russian Army Has Been Good But Not Perfect in Combating the Insurgents in Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 1980.

²⁷John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1973, p. 23. See also Robert Berman and John Baker, *Soviet Strategic Forces: Requirements and Responses*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., forthcoming.

²⁸Thomas W. Wolfe, *Soviet Power and Europe: 1945-1970*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1970, p. 487; Jeffrey Record, *U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Issues and Alternatives*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1974, p. 37.

²⁹At the time the crisis broke, the missile launch sites were nearing completion, but only 42 MRBMs had been delivered and none of the IRBMs had been introduced. Moreover, although nuclear weapons storage bunkers were in various stages of construction, the missiles were far from operationally ready when the dismantling of the sites began. In *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1971, Graham Allison reports (p. 103) that MRBMs had not been observed with warhead sections during their shipboard transportation. All of this involves compound speculation, and none of it should be taken to suggest that the Soviets were not prepared to introduce nuclear weapons once their overall deployment effort succeeded. Nonetheless, the notion that they were in no hurry to move nuclear warheads prematurely to Cuba is consistent with general evidence of Soviet concern over the maintenance of close nuclear command and control.

³⁰Oleg Penkovskiy, *The Penkovskiy Papers*, Doubleday and Company, New York, 1965, p. 331. See also Barron, *KGB*, p. 15, and Allison, *Essence of Decision*, p. 110.

the Soviet command and control apparatus may support the requirement for preemptive operations reflected in formal Soviet strategic doctrine. During the terminal phase of the intense party-military debate over institutional roles after Khrushchev's ouster, an authoritative party spokesman reminded the armed forces that nuclear weapons were so laden with political importance that the party could never allow them "to escape its direct control."³¹ Given the unique vagaries and instabilities of the Soviet Union's one-party authoritarian political system, there are many reasons going well beyond simple concern over command and control that could account for this insistence on monopoly over nuclear armaments at all times. A speculative proposition may be a justifiable fear that premature release of such armaments in a crisis might not only jeopardize Soviet national security but continued party preeminence as well.

Trustworthiness of Soviet "Fraternal Allies"

Western analysts generally assume that Soviet forces alone would bear the burden of initial air and ground operations in a European conflict. At the same time, a major role in the ensuing phases of combat would probably be assigned to various indigenous Warsaw Pact forces (particularly those of the northern tier), whether or not nuclear operations had commenced. The prospect and character of support from these forces would depend heavily on the political circumstances that occasioned the war in the first place and have been topics of intense speculation and evaluation in Western defense circles ever since the Warsaw Pact was first constituted. The Soviet leadership could never be completely confident of effective Warsaw Pact support in any circumstances that directly threatened independent East European security interests.³² Any plan to commit Soviet forces against NATO that required organized Warsaw Pact involvement as a precondition of success would entail a particularly thorny Soviet decision as a consequence of this pervasive uncertainty. It is a safe guess that the various bases of that uncertainty would vex the Soviet leaders to a far greater extent at the threshold of a potentially avoidable European war than many Western intelligence analysts are routinely inclined to assume. Most East European elites are beholden to Soviet power and support for their continued tenure in office, but they are scarcely obliged to squander their own political fortunes or otherwise sacrifice the interests of their domestic constituencies in obeisance to Soviet hegemonial ambitions.³³

The Threat of Military Bonapartism

Since the dismissal of Marshal Zhukov in 1957, the Soviet military has never even remotely challenged the preeminence of party rule. Nonetheless, its interests are frequently at odds with those of the civilian party apparatus and it does command a monopoly on arms in Soviet society. During the 1960s, Western analysts of Soviet party-military relations tended to characterize the two organizations as natural rivals because of their divergent interests and images of how

³¹Major General V. Zemskov, "An Important Factor for Victory in War," *Krasnaia zvezda*, January 5, 1967.

³²For one of the few serious attempts to examine this commonly expressed but rarely documented proposition in detail, see Dale R. Herspring and Ivan Volgyes, "Political Reliability in the East European Warsaw Pact Armies," *Armed Forces and Society*, Winter 1980, pp. 270-296. See also A. Ross Johnson, Robert W. Dean, and Alexander Alexiev, *East European Military Establishments: The Warsaw Pact Northern Tier*, The Rand Corporation, R-2417-1-AF/FF, December 1980.

³³See, for example, Eric Bourne, "Kremlin Allies Grumble over Afghan War," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 4, 1980.

best to deal with the problem of Soviet security.³⁴ More recently, it has become clear to most observers that this tension principally reflected transitory incompatibilities between Khrushchev and his marshals and that party and military interests in the Soviet Union in fact now overlap a great deal. Persisting differences of view typically remain limited to matters of resource allocation and show little evidence of deeper contention over institutional roles and power distribution within Soviet society.³⁵

All the same, the Soviet Union remains a nonpluralistic social organism whose government incorporates no formal mechanism for the orderly transfer of political power. Accordingly, in times of turbulent leadership transition or traumatic external stress, the professional military could play a major role in domestic politics either by throwing its weight behind its favored contender or directly insinuating itself into the processes of decisionmaking in cases that threatened its image of Soviet security interests. Because the party enjoys no natural tradition of civilian rule and lacks the constitutional legitimacy of elected governments in Western democratic societies, it might face the added problem of having to worry about its internal sources of support alongside the choices and dilemmas imposed by external events.

Would the armed forces be disposed to supplant party authority in the event of a nuclear crisis in which the domestic instruments of social control had fallen apart and the survival of the regime lay in the breach? Perhaps not, given almost everything we know about their past patterns of political conduct. Yet such a situation would be unprecedented in Soviet historical experience, and the party leadership could never know for sure. How this awareness would temper Soviet behavior in future crises is unanswerable. It would certainly constitute a planning factor unique to the Soviet side in any confrontation with the United States.

Internal Nationalist Insurrections

An associated question that could beset Soviet leaders in an incipient wartime situation might involve concern over ethnic forces arising that might threaten to fragment the Soviet Union into national entities with separatist political ambitions. The USSR is not a naturally cohesive nation-state in the traditional sense, but rather a quasi-imperial conglomeration of ethnic cultures held together far more by Soviet power than by any feelings of national identity and loyalty. The Slavic component of the Soviet armed forces might indeed fight to the finish for "Mother Russia" in most conceivable conditions of national crisis, but similar devotion could hardly be counted on from those non-Russians who increasingly constitute the majority of Soviet military manpower.³⁶ The Soviet leaders have long been sensitive to the potential threat of insurgent nationalist movements within Soviet borders as a consequence of external encouragement. Indeed, a major component of their rationale for moving into Afghanistan was a felt need to head off any prospect, however remote, of radical Muslim fundamentalism infecting Soviet Central Asia. In recent years, Western public debate has suggested that the United States might have much to gain by capitalizing on Soviet ethnic rivalries and thus fragmenting the Soviet Union politically in the event of war.³⁷ Although there are severe

³⁴This thesis was most prominently expounded by Roman Kolkowicz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party*, Princeton University Press, 1967.

³⁵See, for example, William E. Odom, "The Party Connection," *Problems of Communism*, September-October 1973, pp. 12-26; and "Who Controls Whom in Moscow," *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1975, pp. 109-123.

³⁶See Jeremy Azrael, *Emergent Nationality Problems in the USSR*, The Rand Corporation, R-2177-AF, September 1977, especially pp. 16-22, and S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev, *The Ethnic Factor in the Soviet Armed Forces*, The Rand Corporation, R-2787-NA, forthcoming.

³⁷Colin Gray, for example, has noted the potential deterrent value of a U.S. targeting plan aimed expressly at

practical difficulties concerning how one might actually carry out such a plan to make a significant difference in war outcomes, even the slightest hint of such reasoning in U.S. strategic planning would cause acute discomfort in the minds of the Soviet leaders. After all, one of their predominant goals in any crisis would surely be the preservation of the Soviet state. This interest would scarcely be served well by actions that threatened to unleash internal forces of disintegration beyond the ability of Soviet domestic power to contain.

The Yellow Peril

Perhaps the most deeply rooted fear of Soviet leaders and ordinary Russians alike is the specter of a billion Chinese on the southern flank of the Soviet Union, armed with nuclear weapons and animated by consuming anti-Soviet hatred, major territorial claims against the USSR, and global ambitions aimed at undercutting Soviet influence and presence. The intensity of this Soviet image of China as an awakening giant threatening to unleash hordes of *zheltorotiki* ("yellow beaks") upon the USSR transcends ordinary irrationality and is hard for Westerners, half a globe away, to comprehend. Much competent work has been written on the role of the "China factor" in Soviet threat perceptions and foreign policy conduct.³⁸ The Soviet political-military leadership is acutely concerned about the prospect of a two-front war and could never be assured that the Chinese would not try to capitalize on a Soviet-American confrontation, either as an ally of the United States or independently, with a view toward exploiting the Soviet Union's predicament. The urgency of Soviet concern over China's propensity toward irrationality that was felt at the height of the Cultural Revolution during the late 1960s has almost surely abated dramatically now that Mao has departed and a more secular and moderate leadership has assumed the reins of power. At the same time, China remains a natural enemy of the Soviet Union in a way the United States has never been. The thought least likely to inspire composure in the minds of the Soviet leaders is the prospect of being reduced to China's level of industrial stature and thus prey to Chinese revanchism as the necessary price for strategic "victory" in a war with the United States.

critical Soviet social control mechanisms whose widespread disruption during the course of a war might allow "the centrifugal forces within the Soviet empire to begin to bring that system down from within." "Soviet Strategic Vulnerabilities," *Air Force Magazine*, March 1979, p. 64. See also the reference to possible use of nuclear weapons "to achieve regionalization of the Soviet Union" contained in Walter Pincus, "Thinking the Unthinkable: Studying New Approaches to a Nuclear War," *Washington Post*, February 11, 1979.

³⁸For useful overview discussions, see Kenneth Lieberthal, *Sino-Soviet Conflict in the 1970s: Its Evolution and Implications for the Strategic Triangle*, The Rand Corporation, R-2342-NA, July 1978; and Jonathan D. Pollack, "Sino-Soviet Relations in Strategic Perspective," in Douglas Stewart and William Tow (eds.), *China, the Soviet Union, and the West: Strategic and Political Dimensions for the 1980s*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1981.

V. CONCLUDING CAVEATS

After all is said and done, a great deal of uncertainty remains about Soviet strategic uncertainty. There is much we do not know (and cannot know) about the sources of Soviet behavior and much the Soviet leaders themselves cannot know about how they would act in the face of a major test. We could mislead ourselves dangerously if we ever believed we understood Soviet behavioral style well enough to predict confidently when they would back down in a contest of strength if core survival interests were involved on both sides. Uncertainty can cut two ways, depending on how the Soviet leadership perceives the risks and stakes of a situation. It can counsel circumspection and hesitancy, but it can also provide strong incentives toward forceful action aimed at seizing the initiative, defining the rules of engagement according to Soviet preference, and dominating events before they have a chance to slip irretrievably out of grasp.

A useful example of how the latter phenomenon could insinuate itself in a Soviet crisis dilemma might be sought in the hypothetical instance of a major European war in which nuclear weapons had not yet been used, yet where things were manifestly going badly for the United States and NATO. A sweeping Soviet conventional victory could contain the seeds of disaster for Soviet planners, in that it would threaten to energize NATO nuclear escalation as a last-ditch move to forestall utter military defeat. Such a prospect would be almost certain to give Soviet decisionmakers compelling grounds for theater nuclear preemption, a major move entailing manifold implications the Soviets might genuinely prefer to avoid.

Conversely, in a European conventional war in which NATO had somehow succeeded in disrupting Moscow's offensive momentum, the Soviets themselves could feel powerful urges to raise the ante with nuclear reprisals to head off the possibility of not only losing the military campaign but also perhaps watching their East European empire crumble away in the process. If nuclear employment appeared all but unavoidable, the Soviets might conjure up reasons for *starting* with nuclear operations and *forgoing* the conventional phase altogether. This is why, far more than indications that might reside in Soviet force posture or doctrine, it is so difficult for Western analysts to generate persuasive scenarios for a NATO contingency involving solely conventional arms. However fascinating and gratifying it may be intellectually, U.S. planners and researchers who indulge in elaborate exercises of manipulating fighter sortie rates, tank exchange ratios, and comparable battlefield minutiae as though the analytical problem simply entailed a grand replay of World War II with modern technology are living in a world of sublime unreality. Soviet incentives for nuclear weapons use, to the extent they would be felt at all, would stem less from doctrinal preference than from operational inevitability. If the Soviet leaders felt any mental conflict whatever in such a stressful predicament, it would, in all probability, turn on the question of whether to go to war in the first place, not on whether they had a choice between conventional or nuclear options.

Whatever way Soviet decisionmakers ultimately choose to resolve such uncertainties will depend heavily on the particular crisis they face. In the remote event that the Soviets finally decided the time was right for a full-fledged invasion of Europe and they had carefully planned for such an attack well in advance, they would also have reconciled themselves to the possibility of a broader superpower war and accepted the potential costs of such a war as a fair price for the fruits of theater victory. In such a case, there would be little the United States and NATO could usefully do in the way of threat manipulation and "intrawar bargaining," and the

operational challenge for the West would reduce simply to fighting the war as well as possible and hoping that the Soviets had misjudged their chances for success. In the more likely event that both superpowers found themselves inadvertently caught in a conventional skirmish in Europe (perhaps through expansion of some unrelated third-area crisis) that neither side was eager to pursue, there might be considerable room for the sorts of uncertainties discussed here to lead the Soviets toward some face-saving settlement before the nuclear point of no return had been reached.

In all such cases, we can never know for sure how the Soviet leaders would ultimately react, any more than we can anticipate with confidence how we ourselves would behave. Yet if appreciation of the role of uncertainty in Soviet crisis comportment can never provide an adequate basis for U.S. decisionmaking or substitute for continued investment in programs to reduce the likelihood of such crises, it can at least help place Soviet opportunities and constraints into proper perspective and ease our natural urge to overstate Soviet capabilities. Exaggerations of Soviet prowess can do no greater disservice to responsible threat appraisals or rational strategic planning than to give legitimate arguments for U.S. defense improvements a bad name by association.