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THEATER-STRATEGIC OPERATIONS:

EVOLVING SOVIET ASSESSMENTS

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THEATER-STRATEGIC OPERATIONS:
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IN THE course of executing what Soviet planners designated strategic offensive and defensive operations during World War II, Soviet forces conducted 210 *front* operations, of which 50 were defensive and 160 were offensive.¹ For the most part, the *front* offensives—and a number of *front* defensive actions as well—were conducted in the context of multi-*front* strategic offensives of sweeping scope and scale. Typically, a major strategic offensive involved from 100 to 200 divisions, with 1 to 2.5 million men, 20,000 to 40,000 guns and mortars, and 3,000 to 6,000 tanks and self-propelled assault guns.² The employment of aviation was integral to all of these strategic offensives and the range of 2,000 to 7,500 aircraft associated with strategic offensives clearly matched ground force contributions in relative scale.³ A number of strategic offensives also featured coordinated naval operations and employment of tactical and (in a few cases) operational airborne and amphibious landings as well. Increasingly

centralized planning, control and force integration characterized these strategic offensives, culminating in the establishment of a Far East High Command of Forces in 1945. This headquarters planned and directed the employment of three *fronts* and their subordinate air armies, allocated long-range strike and transport aviation and directed the Pacific fleet, all of which participated in the Manchurian strategic offensive.⁴

The conduct of strategic offensive and defensive operations during the war remained a topic of clear Soviet interest in the initial postwar period, an interest that has gained new intensity in the 1980s. In the spring of 1981, the noted Soviet military historian and theorist, Lieutenant General M. M. Kir'yan, sanctioned a series of more than 200 topics approved for military-historical research in the 1981–1990 period.⁵ Occupying a prominent place on this list, which reflected virtually every key area of contemporary Soviet military concern, were a number of topics

THEATER-STRATEGIC OPERATIONS

Soviet military planners continue to critically examine and reassess the USSR's approach to conducting large-scale strategic combined arms operations. Criteria for defining and categorizing theater-strategic operations, the relationship of offense and defense, and the optimum means of achieving strategic objectives with conventional theater forces are integral to this process. The author evaluates recent Soviet developments in this regard and points to a Soviet recognition that combined arms military forces and operations of reduced size can achieve objectives of strategic significance. Reprints (510)

calling for the investigation of issues specifically associated with strategic operations.⁶ The subsequent response of Soviet military writers is instructive. Areas of close Soviet investigation have included the composition of friendly force groupings in strategic offensive and defensive operations; their control and coordination; the composition of opposing forces and relative friendly-enemy force correlations within theaters and on major directions; frontages and depths; the transition from defense to offense (or the reverse); the resolution and consequences of strategic operations; and, indeed, the very basic questions of what really constitutes a "strategic operation," and what criteria should be used to assign it a predominantly offensive or defensive character.⁷

As Soviet military authors have recently pointed out in an important series of published discussions, the number of strategic operations conducted by Soviet forces in World War II has been revised substantially in retro-

spective postwar assessments. That is, shortly after the end of the war, Soviet theoreticians judged that some 20 strategic offensive and defensive operations had been conducted in the course of the conflict. By the 1960s, the Soviets were assessing that 40 such operations

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had been carried out, and in the 1970s and 1980s, some Soviet military historians put the number of strategic operations carried out by Soviet forces in World War II at more than



50.⁸ While the precise number of strategic operations remains a topic of some debate (clustered around the "50" figure), the Soviets have formulated and generally accepted three "fundamental criteria" for describing an operation as strategic. Specifically, a strategic operation: first, resolves important strategic missions and attains important military-political aims; second, in most cases comprises combat operations of great spatial scope and includes the participation of a considerable quantity of forces and means; and third, is planned by the *Stavka* of the Supreme High Command (VGK), with the coordination of actions by fronts, fleets, and other services of the armed forces carried out by VGK representatives.⁹ Thus, as these criteria and associated Soviet discussions make clear, a strategic operation is centrally controlled at the highest level of command, is usually large and of combined

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arms composition, and, most important, accomplishes critically important military-political goals regardless of its size and scope or the length and intensity of operations.

As a number of Western analysts have noted, Soviet military writings recently have given considerable attention to the conduct of defensive actions at all levels, and strategic defensive operations in particular. Recent retrospective Soviet assessments of strategic operations in World War II have examined closely Soviet strategic defenses in the first period of the war, as well as in subsequent phases, and focused in large measure on how these operations achieved strategic goals, such

as covering strategic deployment or exhausting the combat power of major enemy groupings, thereby facilitating a transition to the offensive. For example, Soviet military writings have judged explicitly that the "classic" deliberate defensive conducted at the Kursk salient in July 1943 should be just the kind of defense Soviet forces should strive to establish under analogous circumstances, while also recognizing that strategic defensive operations at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War should be studied for what they teach about such operations under the worst of conditions.¹⁰

The 1945 Manchurian operation provides an even more intriguing and frequently studied Soviet model in light of current Soviet assertions about "defensive" military posture and changes in the political and military technical components of military doctrine.¹¹ That is, Manchuria illustrates for Soviet planners how a strategic regrouping of forces—making extensive use of a variety of *maskirovka* (deception) means—can rapidly change a strategic defensive posture into an offensive one.¹²

As Soviet discussions have shown, it is, in some cases, difficult even to characterize a strategic operation as offensive or defensive, since most strategic operations contain both kinds of actions. Thus, for example, one set of Soviet authors argues that the Kharkov strategic operation in the winter of 1943 was defensive, while another Soviet military view holds that the operation was just as offensive in character as it was defensive.¹³ The Soviet summary judgment on this kind of difference in assessment is clearly that "the experience of the last war dictates that the offensive and defensive be considered in dialectical unity as interrelated types of strategic actions."¹⁴ Further, as regards contemporary implications, "with the greater complexity of the means of armed struggle and military actions themselves, the interdependence and interconditionality (*vzaimoobuslovlennost'*) [of offense



Soviet tanks crossing
the Manchurian border

The 1945 Manchurian operation . . . illustrates for Soviet planners how a strategic regrouping of forces—making extensive use of a variety of maskirovka (deception) means—can rapidly change a strategic defensive posture into an offensive one.

and defense] will become apparent to an even greater extent."¹⁵

A Polish military author writing a few months later made this same point and expanded on it.¹⁶ He noted that new weapons systems were changing the distinction between offense and defense and that the opportunities for crossing over from the defense to the attack would be more frequent on future battlefields. New generations of deep strike systems could quickly change battlefield force correlations, where "the weaker can suddenly become the stronger." All of this will make it increasingly important to close quickly with enemy forces, "so as to complicate for him the conditions for using long-range strike means by the additional requirement of selecting and choosing targets from among those located near to himself and targets of his own troops and enemy troops which are completely mixed in the given area. . . ."¹⁷ As Soviet military authors have

stressed repeatedly, the role of reserves generally, and strategic reserves in particular, will grow in importance for restoring losses, facilitating the rapid transition to the attack and continuing its development in this kind of complex operational environment.¹⁸

All of the above considerations, while recently highlighted and set out in detail in Soviet/Warsaw Pact military writings and clearly reflecting current areas of emphasis and investigation, have not sprung full-blown in the last few years. Rather, Soviet concepts for modern strategic operations in continental theaters of strategic military action (TSMAs), which reflect to a great extent all of the complexities discussed earlier, have been integral to Soviet planning for at least a decade and a half. Thus by the early 1970s, Soviet military educational institutions such as the Voroshilov General Staff Academy were instructing Soviet officers in the conduct of all components of today's theater strategic operations,



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with a substantial portion of the curriculum devoted to the conduct of army and *front* defensive operations as temporary expedients taken at the beginning of war or during its course.¹⁹ As described during this period, de-

The Soviet goal is to achieve [their] aims with the use of conventional weapons only, by rapidly reducing enemy nuclear delivery means and associated control and support facilities, quickly achieving an intermingling of friendly and enemy forces and so rapidly penetrating opposing defenses that nuclear employment is no longer a useful enemy option.

fensive operations could be deliberate (to cover mobilization and deployment at the start of war, protect flanks, seacoasts and secondary sectors, prevent the breakout of an encircled enemy grouping, and so forth) or forced on friendly forces (by the infliction of heavy losses, by an enemy attack with superior forces, and so on). The requirement to conduct frequently changing offensive and defensive actions within the context of a strategic operation aimed at achieving military-political objectives throughout a TSMA was seen as a basic condition of modern war, with ample precedent from World War II. Indeed, materials from the Voroshilov General Staff Academy in the mid-1970s refer generically to "strategic operations in continental theaters," reflecting their multifaceted offensive and defensive content. In the early 1980s, Marshal Ogarkov (then chief of the Soviet General Staff) used this formulation as well when he first publicly articulated the change in the basic form of military action from the *front* operation to "the strategic operation in a theater of strategic military action."²⁰

All of this is to say that a strategic operation in a TSMA is by definition conducted to

destroy enemy forces in the theater, devastate the military economic base of the opposing alliance, eliminate all or major enemy states from the war and achieve overall military-political objectives through the conduct of offensive and defensive actions by combined armed forces. The distinction between offensive and defensive operations in achieving this goal, while useful for specific actions or components of major operations, is blurred when speaking of overall strategic operations within a theater. New technological developments, as Soviet and Warsaw Pact officers have recently highlighted, are adding to the complexity of these longstanding features of strategic operations, increasing the dynamism of both offensive and defensive components, underscoring opportunities and dangers and generating new planning requirements.

Evolving Soviet Concepts of Theater Strategic Operations

Current Soviet approaches to the conduct of strategic operations in continental theaters are sufficiently well known that they need not be elaborated here.²¹ It is useful, however, to briefly summarize the Soviet concept. As Soviet planners now envision it, a theater strategic operation would comprise a number of major components, coordinated and integrated with each other and carried out in accord with a common plan and concept to achieve defined military-political aims of strategic significance. The Soviet goal is to achieve these aims with the use of conventional weapons only, by rapidly reducing enemy nuclear delivery means and associated control and support facilities, quickly achieving an intermingling of friendly and enemy forces and so rapidly penetrating opposing defenses that nuclear employment is no longer a useful enemy option. Nevertheless, the constant threat of nuclear use by the enemy shapes the conduct of operations by all force groupings and requires contingency planning and readiness for nuclear operations by Soviet



T-80 main battle tank fitted with explosive reactive armor panels.

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commanders and staffs at all levels. Control and planning for theater strategic operations would be exercised by High Commands of Forces in the TSMAs, or, in some cases, directly by the VGK.²²

These current Soviet concepts for strategic operations are founded on theory and practice that were successfully tested in World War II, critically examined and modified in the more than four decades since the war and shaped today by new technologies and evolving theater force correlations that incorporate a spectrum of changing political and military-technical factors.²³ This historical precedent and evolving Soviet military thought suggest that Soviet military planners will retain at least the broad context for the conduct of theater strategic operations discussed above. That is, the execution of air, antiair, *frontal*,

naval and large-scale airborne operations—coordinated, integrated and conducted in accord with a common plan and intended to achieve decisive military-political goals—will remain the basis of Soviet military contingency planning in continental TSMAs through the next decade.

The broad Soviet *military* construct for determining force levels or evaluating arms reduction proposals will be based on the perceived ability to mobilize, deploy, organize for combat and support the force groupings and reserves necessary to conduct military operations capable of achieving strategic objectives. Having said this, it is necessary to stress that the individual components of strategic operations will change in scope, scale and emphasis, and that tactics, operational art and force structure associated with each com-



Hind-E with twin-barrel cannon in place of nose turret.

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ponent will evolve as well. Indeed, as other articles in this issue of *Military Review* discuss, a substantial force reorganization may already be underway that will collectively result in a smaller force structure and in operational concepts that place even greater emphasis on the tactical, operational and strategic maneuver of forces. The more precise coordination and integration of force groupings will continue to grow in importance. Increased emphasis will be placed on how the offensive and defensive content of strategic operations will best contribute to overall objectives and how forces potentially more limited in size, if not combat capability, can achieve decisive results. In addition, the support infrastructure and systems required to generate, move and sustain theater forces will become even more critical for the conduct of strategic operations in the wake of a substantial reduction of forces, as

will the importance of the initial period of war, surprise and *maskirovka* in its many dimensions.²⁴

It should be stressed that Soviet planners explicitly recognize that major military-political objectives and the war aims themselves may be accomplished through the execution of theater strategic operations in their most fully developed current form, or may be achieved through military operations of far smaller scale and scope when enemy resources, enemy will or overwhelming initial success limit the capacity of the opposing coalition to mount an adequate defense. This is a Soviet view that needs to be an integral part of our assessments of evolving Soviet military capabilities into the next decade and in our evaluation of the sophisticated—and often compelling—Soviet formulations about their changing military doctrine and force posture. *MR*

NOTES

1. M. A. Gareyev, *M. V. Frunze-voyennyy teoretik*, [Frunze—Military theorist] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1985), 238–39.

2. V. V. Gurkin and M. I. Golovnin, *K voprosu o strategicheskikh operatsiyakh Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny, 1941–1945* [On the ques-

tion of strategic operations in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945], *Voyenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* [Military-Historical Journal], hereafter cited as *VIZh* (October 1985), 11.

3. Ibid.

4. L. N. Vnotchenko, *Pobeda na dal'nem vostoke* [Victory in the Far East] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1966) is one of the best book-length Soviet assessments of the Manchurian operation, while LTC David M. Glantz's, *August Storm: The Soviet 1945 Strategic Offensive in Manchuria*, Leavenworth Papers no. 7 and *August Storm: Soviet Tactical and Operational Combat in Manchuria, 1945*, Leavenworth Papers no. 8 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1983), remain the finest Western treatment.

5. M. M. Kir'yan, "Perspektivnaya tematika voyenno-istoricheskikh issledovaniy na 1981-1990" [Perspective themes for military-historical research in the 1981-1990 period], *VIZh* (May 1981), 44-47 and (June 1981), 59-61.

6. These topics included, among others: "The Strategic Operation (Conditions of its Origination and Patterns of Development)"; "The Development of Forms and Means of the Strategic Offensive From the Experience of the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War"; "The Organization and Conduct of the Strategic Defense From the Experience of the Great Patriotic War"; "The Preparation and Conduct of the Counteroffensive, From the Experience of the Great Patriotic War"; "Problems of Troop Control in Strategic Operations From the Experience of the Great Patriotic War"; "Methods of Planning and Organizing Coordination when Preparing for Operations by Groups of Fronts From the Experience of the Great Patriotic War (Problems and Means of Resolving Them)"; and "Rear Support of Combat Actions of Aviation Corps and Air Armies of the RVGK [Reserves of the Supreme High Command] in the Principal Strategic Operations of the Great Patriotic War."

7. A number of these issues were addressed in a five-article series appearing in *VIZh* from October 1985 to October 1987. The articles in this Soviet-designated "Diskussiya" [Discussion or Debate] included Gurkin and Golovnin, 10-23; N. K. Glazunov and B. I. Pavlov, "K voprosu o strategicheskikh operatsiyakh Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny" [On the question of strategic operations in the Great Patriotic War], *VIZh* (April 1986), 48-50; A. I. Mikhalev and V. I. Kudryashov, "K voprosu o strategicheskikh operatsiyakh Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny, 1941-1945" (May 1986), 48-50; and Kh. M. Dzhelaikhov and B. N. Petrov, "K voprosu o strategicheskikh operatsiyakh Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny, 1941-1945," *VIZh* (July 1986), 48-49. Also appearing at this same time, though not formally a part of the "Diskussiya," was the related article, A. P. Maryshev, "Nekotoryye voprosy strategicheskoy oborony v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voynе" [Several questions on strategic defense in the Great Patriotic War], *VIZh* (June 1986), 9-16. In the fall of 1987, an unsigned article "Itogi diskussii o strategicheskikh operatsiyakh Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny 1941-1945" (Results of the discussions on strategic operations of the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945), *VIZh* (October 1987):8-24, capped the series.

8. Ibid., Glazunov and Pavlov, 48.

9. In Gurkin and Golovnin, 10, the formulation of these criteria was generally accepted, though various authors argued over how individual operations should be characterized, and how well criteria were applied.

10. Maryshev, 16. Considerable Western interest in the "Kursk model" was generated by the A. Kokoshin and V. Larionov article titled "Kurskaya bitva v svete sovremennoy oboronitel'noy doktriny" [The Kursk battle in light of contemporary defensive doctrine], which appeared in the August 1987 issue of *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya* [World Economics and International Relations], hereafter cited as *MEMO*.

11. See Jacob W. Kipp's article in this issue of *Military Review* for a discussion of Soviet military doctrine, its content, context and potential for change. The perspective provided in Dr. Kipp's article is particularly useful for evaluating such recent, novel propositions as those set out in A. Kokoshin and V. Larionov, "Protivostoyaniya sil obshchego naznacheniya v

kontekste obespecheniya strategicheskoy stabil'nosti" [The counterposition of general purpose forces in the context of strategic stability], *MEMO* (June 1988), 23-31. These Soviet authors discuss four future force postures including a variant in which NATO/Warsaw Pact forces possess only the most limited tactical combat capabilities.

12. In a Soviet reexamination of tactical, operational and strategic force regrouping approaches begun in the late 1970s, the article by Army General I. Tretyak, "Ob operativnom obespechenii peregrupirovki voysk v period podgotovki Man'chzhurskoy operatsii" [On the operational support of troop regrouping in the preparatory period of the Manchurian operation], *VIZh* (November 1979), 10-15, is notable in this regard. Tretyak gives special attention to *maskirovka* measures.

13. Gurkin and Golovnin, 17, consider the Kharkov operation to be defensive, while Glazunov and Pavlov, 49, argue for its more complex offensive and defensive content.

14. Maryshev, 16.

15. Ibid.

16. Stanislav Koziej, "Anticipated Direction for Change in Tactics of Ground Forces," *Przeglad Wojsk Ladowych* [Ground Forces Review] (September 1986), 5-9. This article was translated by Dr. Harold S. Orenstein of the Soviet Army Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

17. Ibid. This is a somewhat recast version of the stated Soviet/Warsaw Pact intention to rapidly intermix friendly and enemy forces in order to help foreclose enemy nuclear employment options.

18. This point is made, for example, throughout Maryshev and in numerous other Soviet military writings such as V. Karpov, "Sozdaniye i ispol'zovaniye strategicheskikh rezervov v gody voyny" [The creation and employment of strategic reserves in the years of the war], *VIZh* (July 1985), 63-67.

19. For example, the Voroshilov Lectures titled "Strategic Operations in a Continental Theater of Strategic Military Action," "Front Defensive Operations" and "Army Defensive Operations."

20. N. V. Ogarkov, "Za nashu sovetzkuyu rodinu: Na strazhe mirnogo truda" [For our Soviet motherland: On guard for peaceful labor], *Kommunist*, no. 10 (1981):86.

21. See, for example, LTC John G. Hines and Phillip A. Petersen, "The Soviet Conventional Offensive in Europe," *Military Review* (April 1984):2-29.

22. As discussed in the Voroshilov General Staff Lecture Materials and other sources, a theater strategic operation may typically include: nonnuclear air operations of combined arms composition to destroy enemy aviation groupings, nuclear rocket and artillery strike resources and other key targets in depth; antiair operations to protect friendly force groupings and contribute to the achievement of air superiority; front operations aimed at defeating enemy ground force groupings within the theater; naval operations in maritime regions of the TSMA to destroy enemy naval groupings, interdict sea lines of communication, and conduct other actions to include the conduct of amphibious landings; airborne operations on an operational-strategic scale to accomplish or support missions ranging from the elimination of smaller, weaker states from an enemy coalition to opening major new areas of combat action deep in the enemy rear; and in a nuclear war, the infliction of theaterwide nuclear strikes by the Strategic Rocket Forces in conjunction with other land, air and sea-based nuclear strike systems.

23. Among the best Western assessments of these ongoing developments is the insightful and well-researched study: Notra Trulock III, Kerry L. Hines and Anne D. Herr, "Soviet Military Thought in Transition: Implications for the Long-Term Military Competition," PSR Report No. 1831, Pacific-Sierra Research Corporation, May 1988.

24. See the two articles by Colonel David M. Glantz in this issue of *Military Review* for a discussion of the role of surprise and *maskirovka* in contemporary Soviet military thought and evolving Soviet operational art and tactics.

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