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Dilemmas And Directions

In Soviet Force Development Policy

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DILEMMAS AND DIRECTIONS  
IN SOVIET FORCE DEVELOPMENT POLICY

This is a difficult topic, one on which we can only be speculative. The Soviet Ministry of Defense does not produce an annual posture statement equivalent to the DOD posture statement. Thus we have to prowl around for what evidence there is in the public domain and draw inferences that reduce some of the mystery about Soviet force development. If you expect great revelations today, therefore, I fear I shall disappoint you. I do, however, believe that Soviet military policy is not as unfathomable as many people encourage us to believe.

Let me begin by defining what I mean by force development policy. It may come as a surprise to some, but most countries do not build military forces randomly, or just to be in fashion, or purely because of bureaucratic momentum. Most of them build toward some mission against some threat, within some doctrinal rationale, that is, with purpose. By force development policy, I mean the rationale for kinds of forces and size of forces. Why tank divisions instead of infantry divisions? Why ICBMs, IRBMs, and ABMs? Why chemical weapons? And why a certain number of each? Why not more? Why not fewer?

Let us first tend to the question of rationale and purpose in Soviet military policy. I see little reason not to take key aspects of Soviet public military policy at face value, particularly at the highest level of generality. How do they explain publicly the need for military forces? In 1917 it was

Bolshevik policy to abolish all regular forces and to replace them with a workers' militia. Regular forces, in their view, were separated from the working class and thus could be used as an instrument to repress the working class. If workers and the military were synonomous, the army could hardly be used against the working class.

That policy, to be sure, was reversed quickly in 1918, and after the civil war, when revolution did not spread to Western Europe, the Bolsheviks quickly found a new rationale for a regular army, or an "army of a new type," as they called it. It was necessary to defend the fledglingly socialist republic against international imperialism. Building "socialism in one country" would have to continue behind the shield of the Red Army until the international correlation of forces favored the socialist camp. True peace could come only with the final victory of socialism over capitalism. The Soviet definition of peace, or "mir," as they call it, is unique and incompatible with Western definitions. Paul Nitze, I was delighted to see, recently expanded on this difference in definitions at some length in an article in Foreign Affairs, entitled "Learning to Live with the Soviets." Defense, in this peculiar Soviet sense, means offense. Peace means unconditional defeat of all nonsocialist states. If that can be done without interstate war, that is, through internal revolutions, so much the better, but it does not mean "coexistence" as most people in the West would understand the term. In fact, peaceful coexistence in the Soviet definition is a "continuation of the international class struggle by other than

direct military means when possible. It was conceived in the early 1920s as a strategy for avoiding war with the West, which Lenin believed the young regime would lose. It meant building domestic industrial power to support a military establishment that could prevail in a showdown. It meant correct relations with the advanced industrial states in order to derive the advantages of economic interaction with the West, and it meant support for revolutions and wars of national liberation in the Third World. It did not mean peaceful coexistence in our language. It was a strategy for irreconcilable conflict, political and military. And it remains Soviet policy today.

If one takes this political rationale seriously as the basis for Soviet military policy, then the force development of the Red Army in the 1920s and 1930s is remarkably logical, even predictable. It was guided by an extensive doctrinal review, beginning the implications of new technologies for future war. Aviation, motorization, and chemical weapons had appeared in World War I. They promised, as Red Army theorists pointed out, a less clear distinction between the front and the rear in war. Bombing of cities, industrial plants, and military forces deep in the rear areas could be expected. Motorized forces could conduct much deeper operations. The new weapons would also require a better trained officer corps and a literate manpower pool for military recruitment. An adequate R&D base and an advanced industrial capacity, to be sure, were imperative for the underdeveloped USSR.

Soviet actions followed the doctrine. The standing Red Army was reduced to a few hundred thousands in active units backed by a large militia force -- a policy designed to save manpower in peacetime. The Red Army became a school for literacy. Officer education became top priority, prompting the establishment of a general staff academy and a host of other measures. In active combat power, the Red Army was allowed to become quite weak. A foreign observer could easily have concluded that the Soviet regime was quietly disarming, a view that would have been as misleading about Soviet military policy as was the contemporary view of the New Economic Policy that the reintroduction of the market economy was a sign that the Bolsheviki had given up on socialism. A near term risk was undertaken in military policy in order to have a modern and large force in the future.

By the mid-1930s, the regular forces were beginning to expand. New equipment was being produced by Soviet industry, and operational doctrine for deep operations had inspired the development of new tanks, airborne forces, and a massive effort to build a modern aviation fleet. Before Stalin's purge of the Red Army, a fairly large number of trained officers were accumulating as a result of the education policy.

War, however, came faster than Stalin calculated, and many aspects of the long-range military force development programs were incomplete. That should not, however, obscure the essential rationale that guided force development and the cluster of coherent policies it produced. They were impressively perspicacious in retrospect.

After World War II, the Soviet military found itself in almost the analogous position it had been faced with in the 1920s. The economy was largely destroyed by war. The number of soldiers under arms was far too large to maintain. The education levels of all ranks were too low for modern technology. And three new technologies, nuclear weapons, rocketry, and cybernetics, had appeared to affect fundamentally the nature of future war.

The Soviet response was also remarkably analogous to the 1920s. They rebuilt the economy, giving the military sector the highest priority. They demobilized most of the active duty manpower, bringing the force levels to very small numbers. The system of military education was revamped, involving a long term upgrade of commissioning schools and military academies. They redefined the nature of future war in light of these new technologies, and they set to work on changes in operations and tactics necessary to deal with the new weapons. The flurry of activity in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s gave birth to most of the present Soviet doctrine and force structure.

The driving factor in all this activity was the change in the nature of future war that the three technologies promised. Two central problems struck Soviet theorists as critical for Soviet military doctrine to solve. First, nuclear weapons bring such large firepower to the battlefield, and second, rockets and cybernetics permit unlimited range and great accuracy in the delivery of that firepower.



Although a great deal was written about Soviet doctrinal development in the 1950s and 1960s, most analysts and students of that analysis tended to see Soviet discussion through the prism of Western discussion of the same problems. As the Soviets have become more explicit, and as we have seen more of the nature of Soviet weapons development, Western analysts have uncovered a quite different picture of that doctrinal evolution. John Erickson, Peter Vigor, Amoretta Hoerber, Joseph Douglas, Benjamin Lambeth, Fritz Ermarth, and many others have given us a clearer picture of the Soviet doctrinal design. A recent paper by Notra Trulock, III and Daniel Goure is notable for the sources it cites -- classified Soviet materials which trace a much earlier Soviet interest in limited and discriminating use of nuclear weapons than is generally appreciated. ["Soviet Perspectives on Limited Nuclear Warfare: Characteristics, Options, and Objectives," presented at the European American Workshop on "West Europe and the Future of Active Defense and Long-Range Offense." Washington, D. C., 16-17 November 1984.] The overall impression gained from these later interpretations is one of a pragmatic Soviet effort to bring the new weapons under control, to make them usable for strategic and operational objectives, even tactical objectives in some instances. This is not to say there is a Soviet desire to use such weapons. Rather, it is to say that they assume they may be used, and in that event, they want to know how to use them purposefully in support of war aims, not viscerally, as a hopeless retaliation or a kind of bluffing deterrence.

The key points to understand in this post WW II phase of Soviet force development policy strike me as three.

First, weapons of mass destruction required that one's own forces must be dispersed in order to present few targets worthy of a nuclear strike. The Soviets solved this problem by echelonment of their forces, spreading them out evenly to the rear so that no really large concentrations can be found.

Second, breaking through an enemy's defense requires great concentration, that is, massing of maneuver forces. The solution to this problem was found in a high speed of attack, requiring the echeloned forces to move forward at 60-100 kilometers a day, causing a rapid accumulation of forces at the front, in close contact with the enemy's defense, thereby permitting breakthroughs and allowing redispersion by deep operations into the enemy's rear.

Third, this doctrine would remain empty theory until the equipment and weapon systems for implementing it were produced in sufficiently large numbers to make it feasible to implement. If one reads Marshal Sokolovsky's 1962 volume, Military Strategy, one is not reading a statement proclaiming a Soviet capability to implement this kind of combined arms offensive with nuclear weapons and rocketry supporting it. Rather, one is seeing a statement of the technical realities, their implications for future war, and some rough ideas about how these new problems may be solved. If one looks at the Soviet force structure in 1980-85, one sees a growing inventory of capabilities to implement the doctrine. Therefore, it is not surprising to see more

and more open source references in Soviet military literature to techniques for conducting war, nonnuclear or nuclear, at the tactical, operational, and even strategic level. These references should not be read as meaning that they necessarily want to conduct war at the nuclear level. Rather, it means that they realize that it can be conducted, and that they have the means. Those means require more than large numbers of small yield nuclear weapons. They include armor-protected infantry vehicles, artillery carriers, air defense carriers, engineer equipment, tactical rockets, frontal aviations, etc. If we truly desire to understand why we have witnessed the largest buildup in military history in the last two or three decades in the USSR, we must grasp this doctrinal rationale. The action-reaction hypothesis, the bureaucratic momentum thesis, and other hypotheses miss the critical determinants.

If this is the historical record to date, what about dilemmas and directions for Soviet force development in the future? To answer that question, we must begin by looking for three kinds of evidence. First, are there any new technologies appearing that promise major implications for the nature of future war? Second, do we see any Soviet doctrinal writing on those implications? And, of course, as a third category, we would expect to see some weapons development and organization change to follow the conclusions of the doctrinal changes.

Indeed, there is abundant evidence for all three categories. The new technologies are microcircuitry, directed energy systems (DES), and genetic engineering. Microcircuitry and DES make

possible what are called "smart weapons," that is, warheads with a variety of conventional energy munitions that are guided to targets with virtually no error, warheads that can seek a target with no external assistance, can discriminate tanks from trucks, and so on. DES are also part of the set of technologies required for the new families of weapons. They make ranging and guidance possible to a degree inconceivable in previous decades. Genetic engineering is less developed in the weapons community, and precisely what it may yield is far from clear. Drugs used for medical purposes could also be used for destructive purposes. The large Soviet commitment of resources to genetic engineering suggests that the Soviet General Staff affects Soviet policy in this area as much if not more than medical considerations.

Military interests in the doctrinal implications of all three technologies can be traced back to the early 1970s, probably earlier. With Marshal Ogarkov's promotion to the position of chief of the General Staff in 1977, a number of other senior officers moved into key positions with him, officers who were already noted for what they had written about changing technologies and warfare. Over the past five or six years, the doctrinal writings have shown a concern for exploiting new weapons and technologies. Ogarkov himself published a notable booklet in 1982 which signalled a major shift in direction, not a break of the kind seen in the 1950s, but a very important one. Ogarkov fairly clearly spelled out the tasks for future force and doctrinal development. And he chided Soviet officers for being slow to exploit new technologies.

A great deal of organizational change has occurred during the Ogarkov period, and much of it appears to be concerned with anticipating not just the so-called "revolution in military affairs" created by nuclear weapons but also another lesser revolution prompted by the latest technologies. To get some idea of the significance of this second shift in military affairs, we only need to read Marshal Ogarkov's interview in Red Star of May 9, 1984. Nonnuclear weapons are becoming so efficient, so destructive, that a global war, in Ogarkov's view, is possible in which nuclear weapons would not be used.

While Ogarkov and the General Staff have fairly well defined the force structure they want in the next two decades, achieving it throws them up against a number of dilemmas.

First, can the doctrine developed in response to the tasks set forth in Sokolovsky's volume also cope with the new realities of technology? If it cannot, what must be done? It seems that Ogarkov has already answered these questions. The deeply echeloned forces may be vulnerable to "smart" weapons and to delays that can destroy the synchronization of the battle necessary to keep the tempo and to exploit breakthroughs. U.S. AirLand Battle doctrine attracts increasing attention in the USSR, and its "deep attack" feature brings precisely the kind of threat that would cause problems for the dispersed Soviet formations before they reach the forward edge of the battlefield. We see modifications in Soviet doctrine already occurring. Chris Donnelly has elaborated the "operational maneuver group" concept. It amounts to bringing more forces forward for commitment earlier and deeper.

In other words, the Soviets see a remedy in speeding up the tempo. That will require even better command and control, better communications, and different formations. At the same time, it may present early and vulnerable targets for the opponent. At least, it requires more than minor changes in Soviet doctrine.

Second, can the Soviet science and technology base support the exploitation of the new triad of technologies for military applications? Or will it simply bog down under the demands placed on it by the military? The answer to this question is not yet clear, perhaps not even to the Soviet leadership. The 1960s and 1970s placed heavy demands on Soviet S&T, but they were met in no small part by exploiting East-West economic interaction. What Soviet scientists could not develop, they usually could count on the KGB to buy or steal from the West. Today that is more difficult; yet it may be more important because of the increasing complexity of the new technologies.

Third, can the Soviet economy handle the new production demands? This is really a twofold question. Can the economy meet both qualitative and quantitative requirements for the anticipated force development and modernization? Again, as in the case of the S&T base, the requirements of the 1970s were easier to meet. Future requirements will place higher per unit costs on industry, and the quality control will be much higher for many items. Following the dictates of Soviet military science, new technologies cannot have a significant impact on doctrine until sufficient quantities of new weapons are available.

All three of these dilemmas must seem cruel to the Soviet leadership. After a twenty-year struggle to get ahead with forces and a doctrine for nuclear weapons and rocketry, they find themselves confronted with a new and analogous struggle to stay ahead. In many categories of forces they have achieved a clear edge. If NATO now proceeds with modernization programs that lead to fielding many systems with the new technologies, those leads may well vanish.

In Brezhnev's last years and under Andropov, it seems that the leadership was fully committed to yet another major modernization effort, another twenty-year program. The doctrinal modifications have already been set forth, and there is of yet no sign of renouncing them. The rate at which modernization will go forward, however, may well be in question. We will not know for some time, in my view, and the answer will depend to a significant degree on Western policies. Trade policy, arms control policy, and force development in the U.S. and NATO will either complicate these dilemmas for the Soviet General Staff or ease them somewhat. Let me explain.

In a review of Soviet political choices in the spring of 1983, I concluded that we should not expect a major Soviet policy review leading to abandonment of detente. Many analysts in the West were at the time suggesting that U.S. policies were forcing Moscow precisely to a fundamental revision. A careful assessment of the gains of detente and the lack of attractive alternative policies forced me to conclude that while it might pay less than in the 1970s, detente would still pay the USSR. Economic needs

combined with the changing political attitudes in the West made it unprofitable for the USSR to continue to trump the U.S. hard-line policy. Recent events seem to bear this judgment out. And the dilemmas in force development policy must play a central role in Soviet behavior. They need to revive as much East-West trade as possible. Otherwise they will have neither the R&D base nor the industrial capacity for their preferred force development path.

Another feature of detente that facilitated Soviet force development was arms control agreements and process. SALT I did two important things for them. First, it ratified a large Soviet advantage in a number of strategic systems, and second, it closed off U.S. strategic defense programs, allowing the Soviets time to catch up in ABM technology. It also kept the General Staff from having to choose between a mix of ICBM and ABM programs and permitted them to accelerate building of their ICBM force without fear that the U.S. would deploy ABMs. The Soviets exploited both of these advantages to stay far ahead in ICBMs and to catch up and actually deploy the one permitted ABM site around Moscow. The U.S. programs, MX and the B-1, have both run afoul of the arms control process, largely in the political atmosphere created by the disputes between proponents and opponents, not because of technical limits in treaty language. BMD has been dormant for over a decade. As the General Staff faces a second postwar modernization program of enormous dimensions, it sees the reviving U.S. interest in strategic missile defense and space programs with military potential. The Soviet return to the



negotiating table was to be expected, and its primary goal will remain to defeat the U.S. interest in BMD and space as effectively as it defeated the ABM in 1972.

The third factor, Western force development policy, can work either of two ways. If the U.S. does not go ahead with developing and fielding significant numbers of the more advanced weapons, the degradation the Soviets anticipate on their combined arms doctrine of the 1970s will not occur. It will remain only a theoretical prospect, not a reality. If the U.S. goes ahead and fields impressive numbers of new weapons, that will push the nuclear issue, heretofore the center of arms control attention, increasingly into a secondary place. That trend has been underway for more than a decade. The megatonnage of the U.S. arsenal has been decreasing since the 1960s. Accuracy in delivery systems decreases the need for large yields. Now, as Ogarkov sees it, further technological change could make nuclear weapons unattractive for military purposes. There is a certain irony in seeing military force developers doing more to reduce the explosive potential of nuclear stockpiles than arms control efforts. There is even greater irony in seeing military force developers, who have worked hard to make nuclear weapons practical for tactical and operational use, leading us to more limited and controlled applications, and perhaps to nonuse. The ultimate irony, of course, would be for the West's urge to find salvation through arms control lead to trade concessions that facilitate Soviet modernization of their military forces while creating a political climate that denies such modernization in the West.

That would leave the West all the more dependent on the actual use of nuclear weapons than would be the case without any arms control at all.

Let me conclude with two general propositions that are worth considering for dealing with the problems and opportunities that Soviet force development dilemmas create for the U.S.

First, arms control without trade control makes little sense and can be downright dangerous.

Second, the qualitative aspects of what is called the arms race have a much better prospect for reducing the likelihood of nuclear weapons use than do extensive efforts in arms control negotiations. Our best prospects seem to lie in a carefully integrated combination of both, where we try to take advantage of the strengths and avoid the shortcomings of each. The arms control process is at root a political affair, a competition that can lose a causal connection to the weapons development it ostensibly sets out to control.