



THE ENIGMA OF SOVIET STRATEGIC POLICY

by Jack Snyder

Analyzing Soviet strategic arms policy is something like taking a Rorschach test. The process reveals more about the predispositions and biases of the analyst than about Russian intentions.

Why is the interpretation of Soviet strategic arms policy so difficult? Can it be made less so? And if not, how should American policy function in light of U.S. uncertainty about Russian intentions?

Since the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) began in 1969, a broad range of conflicting interpretations of Soviet policy has won a correspondingly wide spectrum of supporters in Congress, in academia, and among various factions in the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA. The disagreements do not concern nuances so much as the origins and fundamental nature of Soviet strategic thinking. By and large, it is conceded that, for the foreseeable future, Soviet leaders will not press their goals recklessly enough to risk major armed conflict with the West. But beyond this, almost all questions are open to debate. For example:

Does Soviet participation in SALT indicate a desire to achieve a long-term strategic *modus vivendi* with the United States? Or do Brezhnev and his colleagues see SALT as a temporary, tactical maneuver to lull the West and improve Russia's strategic position?

Does Soviet deployment of new generations of heavy, MIRV*ed missiles represent a conscious attempt to achieve a one-sided capability to destroy hardened American ICBM silos? Or are these deployments merely Moscow's prudent reactions to American advantages in warhead accuracy?

*Multiple Independently-targeted Reentry Vehicles. Each missile carries several warheads aimed at different targets. American MIRVs carry a smaller payload but are more accurate than their Soviet counterparts.

How does the Politburo evaluate the effect of inequalities in strategic forces on the outcome of East-West diplomatic contests?

The following four explanations of Soviet strategic policy illustrate the diversity of positions in the debate. Mutations of these ideas pop up in Senate speeches and Pentagon briefings, as well as in the pages of *Time*, *Commentary*, *The New Republic*, and the scholarly journals. Because evidence about Soviet intentions is ambiguous, each of these radically different interpretations is plausible enough to have won a considerable following among informed observers in government, journalism, and academia.

Seeking superiority. Some analysts contend that the Soviet Union is consciously seeking superiority in strategic arms both to improve the outcome of a war, should one occur, and to intimidate the United States in confrontations short of war. Two beliefs underlie this interpretation. First, the Soviet system, though mellowed since Stalin's time by bureaucratization and ideological "middle age," remains fundamentally expansionist. Second, it is claimed that, for various historical and organizational reasons, Soviet nuclear strategists have never viewed Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD, based on the complete vulnerability of populations and the invulnerability of retaliatory forces) as either inexorable or desirable as a strategic concept. At best, the Soviets see MAD as a transitory phenomenon that must be accepted only until it can be nullified by civil defense measures to protect the Soviet population or by improvements in Soviet ICBM capabilities that would make possible the destruction of American land-based retaliatory forces in a surprise first strike.

If seeking superiority is the key to Soviet strategic policy, competition is inevitable, because the United States must take the necessary steps to counter persistent Soviet attempts to gain unilateral advantage. This view is closely associated with "Team B," a group of nongovernmental strategic theorists assembled by the Ford administration in the summer of 1976 to provide an independent assessment of Soviet intentions, using classified data that had previously been analyzed by the CIA. Prominent members included George J. Keegan, Jr., retired chief of Air Force Intelligence and now executive vice president of the United States Strategic Institute, Thomas W. Wolfe of the Rand Corporation, Richard Pipes of Harvard, and Leon Goure of the University of Miami.

Just trying to catch up. In this view, Soviet behavior can be explained by the Russian desire to catch up with the United States in ultra-advanced weapons technology and in the meantime to balance quantitative advantages against qualitative deficiencies. This interpretation is founded on two premises. First, Soviet political leaders—if not always the military—have consistently recognized and accepted the technological fact of absolute deterrence based on Mutual Assured Destruction. Moscow's reluctance to enshrine this concept in official pronouncements has no operational significance; it is only a verbal concession to military esprit de corps and Leninist doctrinal sensibilities (explicitly embracing MAD seems only a half step away from endorsing "bourgeois pacificism"—a long-standing taboo in Soviet circles). Hence, U.S.-Soviet military competition is unnecessary, once a rough equivalence has been achieved. Expressions of this view can be found in the writings of Paul Warnke, currently director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and Jan Lodal, former staff member of the National Security Council under Henry Kissinger.*

Political compromise. This interpretation suggests that Soviet behavior results from logrolling among important political and bureaucratic personalities. Thus, it is not surprising that evidence about Soviet strategic arms policy points toward several seemingly contradictory interpretations, since the policy itself is a fusion of conflicting outlooks and preferences, not a coherent strategy. For example, Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev may personally view the continuing deployment of new Soviet heavy MIRVed missiles as a counterproductive provocation, and yet he may have had to authorize these programs to win approval of military and party skeptics for a new SALT agreement. According to this view, American

*Paul Warnke, "Apes on a Tread Mill," *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 1975; Jan Lodal, "Assuring Strategic Stability: An Alternative View," *Foreign Affairs*, Apr. 1976.

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policy influences Soviet policy by affecting the credibility of the arguments put forward by various Soviet factions. Presumably, American restraint in the deployment of new weapons would strengthen the hand of those Russian leaders who believe that an acceptable *modus vivendi* is possible and desirable.*

Organizational processes. Some feel that even the "political compromise" explanation assumes too much purposefulness in Soviet behavior. Analysts like Graham T. Allison, dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, suggest that Soviet strategic "choices" (e.g., whether to build more ICBMs or more long-range bombers) may be largely explained as the result of the routine, half-conscious behavior of the Soviet military-industrial establishment. Kremlin choices are so constrained by bureaucratically filtered information, options, and the sheer momentum of established programs that it would be wrong to try to infer any detailed, conscious strategy from observable behavior. As Allison explains it, top decision-makers—including Presidents and Premiers—can *change or disrupt* routinized bureaucratic behavior by conscious intervention, but only rarely can they *control* it sufficiently to obtain the precise outcome they desire.†

Superiority or Just Catching Up?

Faced with this proliferation of theories, how can we choose among them? *Prima-facie* cases are based on gross aspects of Soviet behavior that are alleged to "speak for themselves." Thus the going-for-superiority school considers the SS-18 heavy missile proof that the Soviets are consciously acquiring a one-sided capability to threaten U.S. missile silos, a development said to be obviously incompatible with a sincere concern for equitable security arrangements. Other

*See Raymond Garthoff's "SALT and the Soviet Military," *Problems of Communism*, Jan.-Feb. 1975, and *Cold Dawn: The Story of SALT* by John Newhouse, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973. Of course, the reverse argument can be made that unilateral American restraint would bolster the belief in Moscow that uncompromising bargaining tactics had caused an American retreat. It is equally difficult to predict the effects of U.S. firmness. In the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, it is possible that American firmness convinced the Soviets of the foolhardiness of brinkmanship and led directly to a thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations. At the same time, it could be argued that Kennedy's firmness in Cuba helped to discredit Soviet leaders like Nikita Khrushchev who favored a minimum deterrent force and that it led to the great expansion of Soviet strategic forces in the late 1960s. Thus, even if we accept the "political compromise" view of Soviet policymaking, the implications of that view for American policy are uncertain.

†See Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1971.

schools of thought advance their own *prima-facie* cases. For example, the just-catching-up school claims that the ABM treaty obviously signifies Soviet acceptance of stable mutual deterrence. The trouble with all of these arguments is that several plausible explanations for any action, be it SS-18 deployment or the ABM agreement, can nearly always be advanced.

For this reason, any serious attempt to choose from among rival explanations must fall back on "creative reconstructions" of Soviet motivations, using as evidence speeches, press statements, indirect inferences about internal political struggles, and the like. These "creative" approaches generate their own difficulties, because of the unreliability of the data employed. For example, hawkish Soviet journal articles on strategic doctrine are often cited as proof that the Soviets reject the notion of a stable deterrent balance. But these articles are written in such abstruse and polemical language that they shed little or no light on how Soviet strategic forces would actually be used. Worse still, it is far from certain that their main concern is of operational concepts at all. On the contrary, it may be propaganda, exhortation of the troops, or simply ammunition for use in bureaucratic budget fights. Even the best "creative analysis" is necessarily based on the pyramiding of inferences from such questionable sources.

Attempts to interpret Soviet SALT policies demonstrate the shortcomings of both the *prima-facie* and creative analysis approaches. First, let us examine the *prima-facie* cases mentioned above—that the ABM ban and the SS-18 deployment "speak for themselves" as clear-cut evidence of the trend of Soviet policy. American observers who argue that the Soviets are seeking superiority point to Soviet insistence on deploying large numbers of heavy missiles. This, coupled with multiple warhead technology and inevitable improvements in accuracy, will give the Soviet ICBM force an effective, large-scale capability to knock out U.S. ICBMs in a surprise first strike—a capability that is difficult to reconcile with a sincere, enduring interest in arms control based on equality of security.

At the same time, those who make this argument deny that the 1972 U.S.-Soviet agreement limiting deployment of antiballistic missiles (ABM) shows that the Soviets have renounced the quest for superiority or accepted the immutability and desirability of deterrence based on Mutually Assured Destruction. Instead, they argue that the ABM agreement merely shows that Soviet decision-makers believe that their own ABM would not work but that an American ABM might,

given the U.S. lead in ultrasophisticated technologies. The Soviet leadership, they contend, restricted "defensive" competition to passive measures like civil defense and dispersal of industry, areas in which an authoritarian society has an advantage.

By contrast, observers who argue the *prima-facie* case that the Soviets are seriously interested in long-term SALT accords point to the ABM treaty as marking the end of doctrines of "nuclear victory" in both the Soviet Union and the United States. With ballistic missile defense systems banned, cities will always remain hostages to invulnerable submarine-based missiles, making a meaningful war-winning posture impossible. SALT I marks a point of no return, they claim, and therefore Soviet insistence on heavy missile deployments should be seen as part of an awkward transition period from unrestrained competition to collaborative stability.

Easing Mutual Fears

During this transition period, it is held, the Soviets feel they need such quantitative advantages to provide a partial offset to the American edge in technology, which the Soviets see as the most ominous threat to the long-run strategic balance. Once the U.S. potential for a qualitative breakthrough is sufficiently circumscribed by SALT, the Soviets will be more willing to limit or ban heavy MIRVed missiles. Thus, U.S. reluctance to submit our cruise missile innovations to tight SALT controls touches on the Soviets' fear of our technological dynamism, just as Moscow's reluctance to limit heavy silo-busting missiles touches on our fear that Soviet strategists have not accepted the American goal of ensuring the mutual survivability of retaliatory forces. In this view, the main goal of SALT should be to find a formula that minimizes these residual and largely needless fears.

A third explanation tries to account for apparently self-contradictory Soviet behavior by presenting Soviet policy as the outcome of a political bargaining process. Thus, Soviet proponents of SALT may have had to mollify doubters in their own camp by promising not to consider proposals that would curtail the development of new generations of ICBMs.

Finally, a supplementary explanation seeks to remind us that bureaucratic momentum in itself may account for some Soviet moves. In this view, the deployment of advanced ICBMs requires little explanation. Since this is the Soviet bureaucracy's path of least resistance, it should be explained

not as a calculated decision but as the result of normal bureaucratic procedures. The ABM ban, by contrast, was a true "decision" that required the conscious contravention of a program's momentum.

Each of these contrary explanations seems plausibly consistent with the coarsely sifted evidence. For this reason, of course, none succeeds in establishing a *prima-facie* case against the others. To pursue the question, it is necessary to resort to finer-grained analysis which, given the nature of Soviet data, means building a shaky pyramid of speculative inferences. This is a formidable task that should be undertaken with caution.

Take, for example, an attempt at fine-grained creative analysis to support the political compromise interpretation of Soviet SALT policy. First, the analyst might discuss the Kremlin policymaking process in historical perspective in order to show that intra-Politburo politics and bureaucratic infighting have greatly influenced policy outcomes in the past. He may succeed in showing these effects convincingly and in detail for a study of, say, agricultural policy, but he is less likely to generate much more than vague speculation about defense case histories, due to Soviet secrecy.

Pitfalls of Fine-Grained Analysis

Using Kremlinological techniques, it is difficult enough even to determine which Soviet actors (bureaucratic or individual) supported which policies, much less how greatly each influenced the outcome. American analysts, therefore, disagree fundamentally both about historical case interpretations and about the generalized picture of the Soviet policy process that emerges from them.

Secondly, the analyst would delve deeply into recent published Soviet material on SALT in order to glean evidence of a policy debate. Thomas W. Wolfe, of the Rand Corporation, for example, presents evidence of a debate on strategic issues between Soviet military and nonmilitary authors carried on in the pages of various Russian journals in the months leading up to the 1974 Vladivostok Accord.* However, the debate took place on the esoteric issue of whether nuclear war could be considered an instrument of politics. The underlying

**The SALT Experience: Its Impact on U.S. and Soviet Strategic Policy and Decisionmaking*, Santa Monica: Rand, Sept. 1975 (R-1686-PR). The "muted argument," Wolfe notes, pitted a group of writers identified with the Brezhnev détente line, many of whom were associated with G. A. Arbatov's Institute of the USA in Moscow, against a number of military theorists who expressed skepticism about détente in the pages of *Red Star* and *The Communist of the Armed Forces*.

issues and positions are not explicit; they can only be imagined. Nor do we know whether the terms of the Vladivostok Accord, for example, represented a compromise or an outright victory for one faction over another.

Similar problems confront fine-grained attempts at creative analysis to support the other interpretations. As a result, the claim that fine-grained analysis can fill the gaps left by the coarser-grained approach remains largely unfulfilled.

How then can the United States choose a rational SALT policy in light of our ignorance of Soviet motives, intentions, and likely reactions to future American actions? One traditional "solution" is to distinguish between Soviet capabilities (i.e., present and projected Soviet ICBM forces) and Soviet intentions and claim that we must be prepared to counter the former, regardless of the latter.

This distinction falters on two grounds. First, since existing Soviet "capability" alone cannot provide a *decisive* military victory against the United States under present conditions, additional capability is useful only insofar as it affects the international climate for political coercion and bargaining. To deny that intentions govern attempts at political coercion is to refuse to deal with the significant questions. Second, focusing on Soviet capability is often a euphemism for accepting the worst possible assumptions about Soviet intentions. If the worst-case assumption is wrong—and Soviet intentions less hostile than anticipated—a hard-line U.S. policy might act as a self-fulfilling prophecy and provoke the very behavior we would like to discourage.

Another pitfall is overcommitment to a single estimate of Soviet intentions. Overcommitment to one interpretation is likely to desensitize us to new information on Soviet motives. Disastrous intelligence failures can often be traced to the premature adoption of an exclusive interpretation that locks out all but the most blatant disconfirming evidence.

The need for action under conditions of uncertainty is unavoidable in political life. What can be avoided, however, is the current harmful tendency among academics, politicians, and Washington "experts" alike to deny that our strategic analyses and policy rationales vis-à-vis the Soviet Union are highly tentative—and, frankly, unreliable.