CONTEMPORARY SOVIET MILITARY POLICY*

Introduction

The American defense community and the attentive public are once again in the throes of a wide-ranging debate over the nature of the Soviet military challenge. This debate has been partly abetted by a skillful Soviet effort to project a contrast between Soviet "reasonableness" and American obduracy in the superpower relationship. Mainly, however, it has stemmed from a steady erosion of the fragile national consensus regarding Soviet motivations and their implications for Western security that was first formed in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The sources of this resurgent disagreement over the Soviet threat (and, relatedly, over the appropriate agenda for U.S. defense planning) are both internal and external. On the first count, the massive increases in defense spending sought by the Reagan Administration have not resonated well among many constituencies, in light of pervasive economic difficulties, mounting pressures for budgetary stringency, and the Administration's lack of success in articulating a coherent strategy that might justify its program proposals.1 On top of this, the substantial toughening of the Administration's declaratory rhetoric toward the Soviet Union has conjured up widespread popular fears of an increased danger of nuclear war.2 Not only has this exacerbated the Administration's effort to place the U.S. defense posture back on a strong footing; it has also given rise to increasingly vocal Congressional and popular demands for a negotiated nuclear "freeze," which most defense analysts believe would be highly premature given the numerous military imbalances that currently favor the Soviet Union.3

* An earlier version of this article will appear in Herbert J. Ellison, ed., Soviet Policy Toward Western Europe (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1983).
2. Among the more notable journalistic tracts that have successfully exploited this mounting undercurrent of popular concern are Jonathan Schell, The Fate of the Earth (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); and Nuclear War: What's in It for You? (New York: Pocket Books, 1982).
3. See Barry Sussman and Robert G. Kaiser, "Survey Finds 3-to-1 Backing for A-Freeze," Washington Post, 29 April 1982. This, it bears noting, despite the fact that the same respondents also indicated by two to one their belief that the Soviet Union is ahead of the United States in nuclear weapons and by six to one that the USSR would secretly violate any nuclear freeze agreement the two nations might sign.
In the external realm, these domestic difficulties have been compounded by a powerful blend of nervous indecision within NATO and a carefully orchestrated Soviet propaganda campaign aimed at discredited official U.S. depictions of the Soviet strategic threat. This latter effort, coupled with Moscow's ongoing "peace offensive" and vigorous advocacy of all varieties of arms control, has fostered a rising groundswell of neopacifism and resistance to nuclear force modernization in Western Europe and thereby deepened further the traditional division of outlook between the United States and NATO. It has also lent encouragement to those individuals within and around the American defense community who have always been disposed to interpret Soviet military programs and behavior in the most benign possible light. The fact that Soviet power and assertiveness have continued to grow uninterrupted since the collapse of détente, with motivations clearly inimical to Western security interests, has failed even to produce a commonly agreed Western understanding of the problem, let alone a military response appropriate to its demands.

Much of the reason for this continued confusion over the nature of Soviet military activity lies in the tendency of American defense debates to fixate on technological marginalia rather than on the more basic premises that have driven Soviet military programs over the past decade and a half. This discussion aims to help correct that misdirected focus. It is not principally concerned with hardware specifics, such as the numbers and performance characteristics of Soviet weapons. Although these specifics cannot be ignored by defense planners, they are less important for informing a purposeful defense policy than awareness of the broader underpinnings of Soviet military conduct—how the Soviets perceive their security predicament, why their programs have assumed the shape they have, and what these programs reveal about underlying Soviet strategic goals.

Concentration on the material elements of Soviet power to the exclusion of these larger matters obstructs consideration of the important operational axioms that shape the context in which Soviet defense decisions get made. Yet these broader axioms that make up Soviet strategy and constitute the key link between Soviet budget planning and force capabilities are critical to a correct understanding of the Soviet strategic challenge. It is not any specific