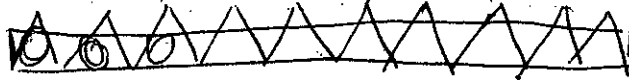


CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT
FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

UNITED NATIONS PLAZA AT 46TH STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017
TELEPHONE: (212) OX 7-3131
CABLES: INTERPAX

THE INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

18, ADAM STREET, LONDON W.C.2.
TELEPHONE: (LONDON-01) 930 3757-8; 930 7769; 839 1563
CABLES: STRATEGY LONDON W.C.2.



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The Strategic Context: The Soviet Perspective

by

M. Michel Tatu

I. One important observation must be made prior to any study on the Soviet approach to the problems of strategic weapons: whereas an enormous mass of technical information, political documents, military assessments - in short practically everything on which political leaders depend in making their decisions - is available for studying these problems in the United States, in the USSR all this is shrouded in the most absolute secrecy. Even the technical data on the Soviet military potential are only known from American sources. It is via Washington that we know not only the number of Soviet rockets but also their names, although these names are purely fictitious and probably bear no relation at all to Moscow's own terminology.

The widespread use of reconnaissance satellites has only partially remedied this situation. In the first place, the data collected via these satellites are owned by those using them and can be distorted in the furtherance of their aims. Even if this distortion is not deliberate or on a major scale, the public is not given the raw information but only the 'adversary' version of it, which can, of course, add a new dimension. In the second place, the translation into geographic terms of a strategic decision is only part of the whole: it is merely the end result - frequently belated - and offers no clarification of the circumstances, the discussions or the options which governed this decision, nor indeed of the next objectives of the programme. Let us suppose, for example, that the Soviet leaders, in evaluating the American Safeguard programme, found themselves in the position in which the U.S. customarily finds itself vis-à-vis the USSR. Even

assuming the best conditions, it would only be about now - Spring 1970 - that their experts would have begun, from photographic analysis, to indicate to them the existence of some 'suspect' activity near two U.S. Minuteman bases: Malmstrom and Grand Forks. Again, this might merely be road construction and other 'infrastructure' work, and only the boldest would have come to the conclusion that this was the beginning of the deployment of an ABM network. All the well-known stages in the birth of this network, from the first decisions taken by Mr. McNamara in 1967 to the major debate in the U.S. on this theme during 1969, would have remained completely unknown. The Russians would doubtless have been unaware of President Nixon's intention to proceed with Phase II of the Safeguard network and of the difficulties placed in his path in this respect by the Senators.

This enormous disparity in the extent of the information available is highly advantageous for Moscow but it also conceals a weakness:

(1) The resulting advantage at the SALT table for Mr. Semionov - or rather for those who give him his instructions - is an obvious one. The Russian side knows as much as the whole world knows about the American strategic potential - in other words, a great deal - plus all the information provided by its observation satellites and intelligence services. It also knows many of President Nixon's intentions and the difficulties he is encountering, and therefore is in a much better position to know where Soviet diplomatic pressures can best be applied. Finally, it can compare at any given moment what the American side says it knows concerning the Soviet strategic potential with the true potential. Aware of the extent of the other side's knowledge of a situation which it is desired to keep secret, Moscow is in an excellent position not only to spot its partner's errors, and thus find the most effective means of perpetuating secrecy wherever possible, but also, by camouflage operations or well placed 'leaks', to influence the other side's evaluations in the desired direction.

(2) The weakness is the total absence in the Soviet Union of any public debate on strategic questions and, as a consequence, the fairly primitive level of thought in this area. It is not, of course, possible to be categorical about this, since everything takes place without being immediately observed. These questions are debated within a military and political elite, making use of 'brains trusts' which do not lack skill, intelligence or a modern outlook. The technique, however, of restricting discussion to those who have a 'need to know' and of tackling an essentially intellectual problem within a hierarchical prism has never contributed to worthwhile debate. If strategic analyses have been

pushed so far in the United States the credit for this should not only go to the Pentagon computers and the shrewdness of the General Staff, but also to the participation of university circles, to Senators anxious to conserve national funds, to the Press and more generally to all those citizens who are concerned with the questions of war and peace. Even though, in the final analysis and in either case, decisions are taken by the 'establishment', they will be more finely balanced and supported by better arguments after an active debate and if their implementation is subject to the scrutiny of public opinion.

In the USSR, where leaders are accustomed to pontificate when addressing their public, eschewing any polemics against an opposition, the reasoning is far more simplistic. The volume on 'Military Strategy', which was published in 1963 under the direction of Marshal Sokolovsky and is the latest major work produced in Moscow on this subject, describes NATO's entire strategy as follows: 'The aggressive imperialist bloc is preparing a general atomic war of destruction against towns, industrial regions and targets and communication centres, together with the mass annihilation of the civilian population throughout the territory of the Socialist countries'. It is true that the current doctrine at that time of the Atlantic Alliance was that of massive reprisals which could scarcely be called subtle. The strategy prescribed for the USSR, however, is even less subtle: according to the same work, it consists of 'retaliating with massive nuclear attacks upon the adversary's strategic nuclear facilities, economy and system of government, while at the same time annihilating his armed forces in the theatres of military operation'.⁽¹⁾ Should we conclude that the Soviet High Command intends to follow a 'counter-force' and a 'counter-city' strategy simultaneously? In any event, it is not very clear what purpose would be served by retaliation against the other side's strategic nuclear facilities, as these would already have been used. Perhaps it may at least be deduced that the USSR would not allow itself to become embroiled in a war conducted only with tactical atomic weapons, and that it would immediately reply with its strategic arsenal. In any event, all the meagre literature published on this subject in the USSR scarcely answers any of the fundamental questions.

II. The great differences between the outlooks of Moscow and Washington on these questions are, in fact, mainly due to the very special psychological situation in which the Soviet leaders find themselves. The former revolutionary bastion, now a world power with its fundamental ambitions fulfilled, and thus conservative, is characterised in its outlook by features from both these periods:

(1) pp.378 and 380 of the 1963 Russian edition.

(1) From its revolutionary origins it has retained a Manichaeian conception of the world: 'us' and the rest of the world. Whereas the United States thinks in terms of a world balance and sees in its power an instrument in the service of this balance, the Soviet Union thinks in terms of 'the advance of socialism' (for which read 'the advance of our policies') and sees the furtherance of its interests as an end in itself. There is nothing abnormal in this: America is ready to accept the status quo which, if one draws a veil over the Soviet conquests of the Second World War, corresponds broadly to its own interests; the USSR, on the other hand, feels that this status quo can and should be modified in its favour, as it already has been in the past and in accordance with the growth of its military and economic might.

Apart from this complex about always being second and wanting their own place in the sun, the Russians have inherited from their revolutionary period the need for enemies. Just as any violent revolution, by definition, is carried out against very real enemies, so any totalitarian regime which is spawned by violent revolution and which wishes to perpetuate itself without change needs to define itself and justify its existence by reference to its enemies, real if they exist but imaginary if they do not. Denunciation of 'imperialism', of its 'intrigues' and its 'threats of war', will remain forever necessary for the survival and cohesion of the present regime. It is wrong therefore to expect that the conclusion of such and such a partial agreement with Moscow will create the 'climate' or the 'détente' which will enable other problems to be settled in its wake. On the contrary, any such agreement is highly likely to induce the Soviet leaders to harden their attitude and to raise their guard against any illusion of relaxation in order to avoid the 'demobilisation' of their political apparatus and opinion. Similarly, it is not enough to explain the difficulty of any dialogue with Moscow by the Kremlin leaders' 'mistrust' of the West. This mistrust has existed from the origins of the regime and, over the years, has become more apparent than real: in any event, it is carefully cultivated by the political leaders. It is not by trying to prove its 'good faith' that the West will dissipate this mistrust.

(2) The elevation of the USSR to the rank of a world power has given this basic outlook some new aspects. The desire for expansion is now subordinate to the number one target: that of keeping what has already been acquired. In a certain sense, therefore, Moscow is interested in maintaining the world balance, particularly in areas like Europe where past conquests have been considerable and the prospects of new gains are slight. In the same way, the existence of nuclear weapons and the threat of total destruction incline the Soviet leaders

to avoid a global confrontation with American power. This is an important reason but it is not the only one: an older reason is that any major war would seriously test the national and political cohesion of the Soviet system. Well aware that this cohesion is more apparent than real, because it is based on fear, the Russian leaders, as was the case with Stalin in 1940 and 1941, have always done their utmost to avoid such a test.

(3) None of this means that the appetite for expansion has lessened. It has merely been subordinate to the imperatives mentioned above. The objective could be described in the following terms: wherever a military, political, economic or diplomatic gain can be achieved without any risk of global confrontation with the United States, and whatever the stake, the opportunity is worth seizing. Two specific points can be made in this connection:

(a) The will to expand is governed rather by opportunist considerations than by the defence of strategic, ideological or political interests. Russia's security in Europe, for example, has never been surer than it is today, and it is not in defence of that security that the Soviet fleet is expanding into the Mediterranean. There was, quite simply, a place to be filled in the Arab world and the USSR has taken it, without yet really knowing how and to what end its presence there will be exploited and also without having calculated all the sacrifices and risks which the maintenance of this presence will entail. It is therefore not entirely true to say the USSR is merely carrying out the policies of the Tsars. The latter's objectives lay close to their immediate frontiers, towards the open sea and the Straits. Their successors have renounced none of these ambitions, which, in any case, they have largely fulfilled, but they are looking even further afield and without any specific aim. If they find themselves blocked close to their frontiers - Turkey and Greece for example - they expand farther afield, into the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

(b) The actual methods of expansion have altered considerably over the past few decades. Khrushchev replaced the technique of subversion by the Communist Party and the Komintern, which Stalin preferred, with the technique of revolution 'by example' and by the contagious effect of the Soviet Union's higher standard of living and greater development. These two methods have certainly not been finally abandoned, but the resistance of the Western societies, on the one hand, and the difficulties of the Soviet economy, on the other, have made them a little out of date. Since Khrushchev's fall, the Brezhnev-Kosygin team has reverted to the more classical, less revolutionary but more effective method of slow military, political and economic penetration. Economic and particularly military aid, the search for overseas bases, more or less discreet shows of force - military manoeuvres, 'friendly' visits of naval units, etc. - have assumed a new importance.

One disadvantage of this policy is a certain dilution of responsibilities resulting in risks and embarrassment for the USSR itself. Unlike Stalin, for example, who only supported 'orthodox' Communist rebellions over which he had direct control, the present Russian leaders have been drawn into the support of regimes whose initiatives they do not really control, into the espousal of causes which are not their own; in short, into intervention in distant conflicts, the outcomes of which are sometimes doubtful. Setbacks in the Congo, Ghana and Indonesia were 'digested' without difficulty, but where the stakes are more important Russian diplomacy becomes caught up, not always willingly, in the outbidding of extremist elements which are not always 'sure' from Moscow's point of view (El Fatah in the Middle East, Sihanouk in Cambodia, etc.). The Kremlin has also frequently experienced the ingratitude of its protégés to their protector. All the evidence indicates that this apprenticeship in the role of a great power, with all its responsibilities and frustrations, is only just beginning for Soviet diplomacy.

III. Applied to the armaments race, all these considerations make it possible for us to define the Soviet attitude - tentatively, of course - in the following terms:

(1) The first principle is that the Soviet Army should not merely have resources which are equal or superior to those of its adversary, but more generally should have at its disposal everything with which science is capable of providing it. 'Because a particular weapon exists either in the hands of the Americans - and that is a decisive reason - or on our scientists' drawing boards, then we must have it': that always seems to have been the attitude of the Soviet 'military-industrial complex' over the past few years. Although the civil power did not accede to all its demands, particularly under Khrushchev - for example over the refusal to build aircraft carriers, and again over the curious repugnance in the early sixties about the widespread deployment of inter-continental missiles - decisions since then have been much more favourable to this complex.

A particularly typical case is that of the ABM system. The first appearance of the 'Galosh' network around Moscow was only revealed by the American satellites in 1966-1967, and the decision to install it was probably not taken until after 1964, but a reading of the work already mentioned above by Marshal Sokolovsky leaves no doubt whatever that the Soviet military were already counting on the pursuit of this course in 1962 - the date of the first edition of this book. As we have seen, the strategists in Moscow hardly troubled to find out whether this decision would upset the balance of deterrence or whether, for example,

the Americans would suspect them of wanting to defend their cities in order to prepare a surprise attack. The important point was that an opportunity existed to defend themselves, even if only partially, against the other side's rockets; this chance therefore had to be seized.

(2) The game of deterrence is seen, in fact, in a very different light in Moscow and in Washington. For the Americans, nuclear deterrence is an essential feature not only of the security of the United States but also of the general world balance. The notion that maintenance of this balance is an end in itself, that therefore one must put oneself in the place of the adversary and reassure him of one's good intentions even to the extent of offering him part of one's striking force as certain U.S. politicians have suggested - all these absurd ideas make no impression whatsoever on Soviet strategists. Their conception is a much simpler one, and not only because they must respect the dogma according to which wars can only be unleashed by the 'imperialists'. For them the sole purpose of nuclear deterrence is to prevent a war of aggression against the USSR. Anything that strengthens Soviet power is accordingly good and anything that defends it against such a war - for example an ABM system - is even better. There is no point in wondering whether such and such a strategic decision will be interpreted by the other side as an aggressive gesture, because there is no intention of attacking. Kossygin's reply in 1967 at a press conference to a question put to him about the reason for deploying the ABM network around Moscow - "What is more natural than the desire to safeguard human lives?" - was not merely a reply for propaganda purposes, despite its simplistic nature. The notion of 'necessary hostages' seems profoundly foreign to Soviet dialectic.

There is another factor which explains the more primitive nature of Moscow's outlook. Whatever they may say, the Soviet leaders fully appreciate that the West is primarily interested in maintenance of the worldwide status quo, and that it neither intends to attack the USSR nor to unleash local conflicts on a lesser scale. All the major crises which have occurred since the last World War, in Berlin, in Berlin, in Korea, in Cuba, have been provoked by the initiatives of the Communist camp, and it is also as a result of moves from Moscow that they have been resolved. What is the point therefore, of drawing up all sorts of strategic and tactical 'contingency plans' to deal with situations to which one, in any case, holds the key?

This situation is, indeed, in the process of changing since Moscow has been induced to assume increasing responsibilities in conflicts for which it was not directly responsible, particularly in the Middle East and Indochina. The prospect of an attack in force by Israel against Cairo or Damascus, or of a general Israel-

Arab war resulting from an illtimed offensive by Nasser, creates grave uncertainties which are certainly preoccupying military and civil experts in Moscow. The Chinese menace, to which we shall revert later, is a source of other uncertainties in the East. In its confrontation with the United States and NATO, however, the game is indeed much more tranquil than the propagandists would have us believe.

(3) The economic aspect of the armaments problem is also seen in quite a different light in Moscow and Washington. In spite of the enormous burden which such military expenditure imposes on a country whose national product is scarcely a third of that of the United States, the problem of allocating resources seems to be much less acute than is generally stated and even that it is more easily resolved in the Soviet Union than in the United States. The difference between the two Gross National Products is largely offset by the much lower standard of living of the Soviet people, by the total absence of opposition and by the absolute priority which has always been given to defence needs. Furthermore, the system of State capitalism and the concentration of political power gives the Politbureau very extensive opportunities to manipulate the economy. It is also probable that the armaments problem is much less a budgetary and financial one (with the fantastic system which governs the fixing of prices, does even Mr. Kosygin himself have any precise idea of what the rouble is worth?) than a purely 'organisational' problem of the distribution of specific resources: raw materials, equipment and labour. The USSR lacks none of these, at least not to the extent of being unable to satisfy the requirements of this high priority sector. At the worst, given deficiencies in all other sectors, enough would still be found for the Army. That is what has been happening over the past five or six years, when the USSR has been making very considerable and successful efforts to achieve a strategic build-up despite serious agricultural difficulties and the virtual stagnation of industry.

This situation can continue for a long time yet, but there is a danger looming on the horizon: that of lagging behind the United States in quality, of an inflexible technological gap which no amount of authoritarian manipulation or priority effort will be able to fill. The authoritarian nature of the Russian economy, the rigid, tightly hierarchical and bureaucratic structures which govern the political and intellectual life of the country, give the Soviet leaders much greater freedom of action than is possessed by democratic governments, but they also have the disadvantage of impeding scientific research in some measure and, even more, of impeding the practical application of its discoveries. Furthermore,

the excessive degree of priority accorded to the armaments industry in the USSR and the tight secrecy which surrounds it result in the civilian industries being deprived of the technological 'fallout' from which such industries normally benefit in other countries. The civilian industries, in turn, do not provide the armaments industry with the services which the latter is entitled to expect. It is clear, for example, that the electronic equipment used by the armed forces in the United States would not be so highly developed if the computer industry had not been tested and enriched by any number of civilian applications. That factor certainly explains why this same industry is lagging behind in the USSR, as reflected notably in its abandonment of the moon race. It is impossible to remain indefinitely in the vanguard of world progress when all the rest of the economy and the peoples' standard of living are stagnating at too low a level.

This technological gap has only recently made its appearance but, unless present structures are changed in some way, it will certainly continue to grow. In particular it may cause the USSR to lag seriously behind in the new lap of the arms race which the deployment of ABM and MIRV has opened up.

(4) This last factor may have been one of the reasons which led the Soviet leaders to open the SALT negotiation with the United States, but it is impossible to be categorical about this: it is not sufficient for the gap to exist for it to be admitted as a fact in Moscow.

We have to accept, in truth, that the reasons which prompted the Kremlin to agree to this highly unusual dialogue are not yet completely clear:

(a) On the one hand, the Soviet leaders may experience a certain satisfaction at the idea of seeing themselves cast in the role of a full partner of the United States on the strategic level. Mortified by the eternal 'second ranking' which was and still is their lot in many fields, they have gone up a grade in the hierarchy. In this connection, a preliminary conclusion can be drawn from all the considerations mentioned above: whatever agreement is eventually reached in SALT, it will have to give the Russians nothing less than parity with the United States; in other words, it will have to give Moscow the opportunity of catching up in all fields where it now lags behind: submarine-launched missiles, bombers and tactical atomic weapons in particular.

Finally, it must be observed that SALT offers for the first time to the Kremlin the opportunity of directly influencing U.S. nuclear policy. Subject to further information, this argument would appear to have been the main argument in favour of Moscow agreeing to these talks.

X (b) SALT, however, also has disadvantages. First, it obliges the Kremlin, so firmly wedded to secrecy in these matters until now, to lift a corner of the veil which covers its intentions. Even if its negotiators say nothing whatsoever about them, their reaction to whatever American proposals are put forward, the questions they ask during the discussions, give vital clues to their counterparts in Washington, who have everything to learn in this respect. One is almost tempted here to speak of a unilateral concession, since it is doubtful whether the Russians will learn much which is new about American strategy compared with what they already know.

Q Second, if, as already stated, the minimum agreement to be reached will ratify the full and complete parity of U.S. and Soviet strategic power, there are some reasons to doubt whether Moscow's leaders are bent on concluding even an agreement of this type. In view of what we have seen of the appetite for expansion 'by opportunity' which characterises Soviet psychology, and in spite of the objective existence of the technological gap, it would be rather surprising if the Kremlin were to agree to tie its hands for ever and to abandon even the distant hope - even far off - of acquiring superiority over its rival, whether by a new quantitative effort or by some miraculous technological breakthrough. We should note in passing that such a gesture would run counter as much to the most venerable Russian traditions as to the regime's official doctrine which in principle is continually working for the modification of the world balance of power in favour of 'socialism' or, in other words, of the USSR.

It would only be otherwise if Moscow intended to eliminate nuclear deterrence completely from international relations, so as to regain its freedom of action at the level of conventional forces. This, however, would require either that the USSR and the United States should mutually renounce all nuclear weapons (such an improbable hypothesis on both sides that it can be quickly dismissed) or else that nuclear war should become so impossible that all other forms of conflict would become possible, both in Europe and elsewhere. Here again it is not easy to see how such a result could be achieved.

Thus an agreement firmly freezing the strategic relationship between the two Great Powers seems unlikely, even on the basis of parity. At best, a series of agreements, both partial and limited in time, codifying in some way the deployment of particular weapons for a given period, would be a more realistic hope. This solution would have the advantage for Moscow of slowing down the development of U.S. strategic power and thus of allowing the more rapid attainment of parity. The Kremlin, however, would not commit itself beyond that.

IV. The Chinese threat introduces a major dimension into this context but it does not substantially alter, in my view, the general pattern. It does indeed present a danger which the Kremlin must in no circumstances ignore. Unlike the United States, China is a real enemy for the USSR, not an imaginary one created for 'ideological' purposes. The geographical contiguity of the two countries, the length of their common frontier and the territorial claims of each against the other, the struggle being waged by both powers for leadership of the Communist world: everything combines to transform their opposition into fundamental conflict. Of all the conflicts in which the USSR is embroiled throughout the world, this is the only one which really poses a threat to its security. To this must be added the fact that Peking shrouds in the same secrecy as Moscow its military potential, its strategic plans and its decision making processes and that, more generally, practically all the psychological factors we have seen at work in Moscow's relations with Washington apply equally to the Chinese attitude towards the USSR.

Having said this, the subtleties of the Three Power Game, assuming they exist, are more likely to be familiar ground to Washington than to Moscow, and it is hardly likely that the Chinese threat will introduce an element of sophistication into the outlook of the Kremlin strategists. For them, China is a second front to which they must look, and that is all. Logically, this situation could provide them with an excuse to demand not only parity but even superiority over America at the SALT table. They could make the point that China is more of a threat to the USSR than to America, if only for reasons of geographical proximity, and that the right to a superior arsenal of weapons must therefore be accorded them. But as it is highly unlikely that the United States would accept such an argument, discussion need not dwell upon this point.

On the strategic level, moreover, the threat is still slight, despite the recent development of the Chinese arsenal, and Moscow has no reason to fear a nuclear attack from Peking in the foreseeable future. As we saw during the incidents on the Ussuri in 1969, Soviet superiority is still decisive, even in the field of conventional forces, and Moscow still retains the initiative at all levels. Although the possibility of a Russian preventive attack against the Chinese nuclear force cannot be dismissed out of hand, the USSR has again proved that it can resist the 'Patton temptation' and can abstain from settling accounts with a potentially dangerous enemy. As we saw in Prague in 1968, preventive action is not irreconcilable with Russia's political doctrines.
