



Director of  
Central  
Intelligence

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# Soviet Strategic Nuclear Attack Options: Selected Issues for Warning and Policy

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**Interagency Intelligence Memorandum  
Summary**

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NI IIM 89-10006//  
September 1989

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***The following intelligence organizations participated  
in the preparation of this Summary:***

The Central Intelligence Agency  
The Defense Intelligence Agency  
The National Security Agency  
The Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State

***also participating:***

The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army  
The Office of the Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy  
The Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force  
The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters Marine Corps

***The full text of this Interagency Intelligence Memorandum is being published  
separately.***

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# Summary



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Overall Soviet goals in a future war—in particular, achieving political and military objectives in Europe and East Asia—would affect the nature and timing of a Soviet strategic nuclear attack on the United States. Substantial evidence indicates that, if the Soviets were to use nuclear weapons against the United States, they would most likely do so as the result of a major conventional war in Europe. The Soviets envisage a period of political crisis, heightened tension, and mobilization before such a war begins. The activities involved in conventional force generation—that is, readying these forces for war—are numerous and detectable. The Soviets have the capability to initiate a massive strategic nuclear attack on the United States from a peacetime posture, mainly because their ICBMs are normally at high readiness. But carrying out such an attack would require the Soviets to forgo readying their conventional forces and the rest of their strategic forces, thus putting these forces at risk from a US nuclear counterstrike. 

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Warsaw Pact military leaders do not believe that they could launch a rapid attack on deep strategic objectives from the forward area in Central Europe without major reinforcements. We estimate that the Soviets would need weeks to generate their forces for sustained offensive operations. If the unilateral force reductions announced by the Warsaw Pact are completed by 1991, the preparations for Soviet conventional forces for a war in Central Europe would be even longer.<sup>1</sup> The Intelligence Community judges it would detect the mobilization of Soviet conventional forces 

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 The Soviets would generate their strategic forces in the context of mobilizing their conventional forces for war, providing additional indicators of a potential Soviet nuclear attack on the United States. The outbreak of a conventional war in Europe would be a critical warning indicator of a potential Soviet nuclear attack on the United States. Because of uncertainties about the likely course and duration of the conventional war, however, we still could not confidently predict at its outset if and when the Soviets might decide to launch such a nuclear attack. But as the war evolved, we would expect to acquire additional indicators should the Soviets prepare such an attack. 

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A Soviet "bolt-from-the-gray"—that is, a sudden strategic nuclear attack on the United States during a severe international crisis—is substantially less likely than a generated Soviet attack following a period of conventional war. In this scenario, the Soviets would choose to generate a smaller portion of their strategic forces (and substantially curtail conventional force generation) to try to reduce US warning and thus destroy more US strategic forces than would be possible in a fully generated attack, thereby improving their prospects for limiting damage to the Soviet Union. This option, however, forgoes any opportunity to keep and win the war at the conventional level and puts at risk all forces that have not been generated, including those that would play a crucial role in combat operations in European and Asian theaters. [redacted]

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In comparison with the above scenarios, the Soviets are highly unlikely to launch a surprise nuclear strike against the United States during peacetime—a "bolt-from-the-blue" attack. As long as the United States has a [redacted] alert weapons in the strategic triad, the Soviets would lack confidence in their ability to substantially disarm the United States (or to prevent most US ICBMs from launching), an apparent prerequisite for initiating a strategic nuclear attack in the absence of a threat of war. Moreover, because the Soviets would forgo most force generation in an attempt to achieve surprise, they would necessarily place their ability to achieve broader war objectives in greater jeopardy than in the other scenarios. Overall, the combination of improving US strategic force survivability and the capability to hold critical Soviet targets at risk will further diminish Soviet incentives to launch a surprise attack. [redacted]

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Before the launching of a Soviet nuclear attack on the United States, we would not expect to predict precisely when it would occur or to be fully certain that an attack would take place under any scenario. [redacted]

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[redacted] The Soviets would take steps to try to conceal their preparations, such as using the guise of a military exercise. And some of the actions the Soviets would take to ready their forces to initiate a nuclear attack on the United States would be similar to those they would take to prepare to respond to a US nuclear attack. Because of such limitations and ambiguities, we can only offer judgments about *potential* Soviet preparations for an attack [redacted]

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