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MISREADING INTELLIGENCE

by Les Aspin

It is not enough to cite Winston Churchill's epigram that the Soviet Union is a "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." The truth is that the United States has not properly focused its intelligence and analysis efforts.

Intelligence analysts have an aversion to studying Soviet intentions and priorities—and understandably so. Most of the data on intentions—documents, speeches, and human intelligence reports—are necessarily soft. Technical collection, however, supplies hard data. The technical profile of a missile in test flight can be clearly inferred from telemetry.

But what does a speech by Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev mean? Can it be trusted? Why was it delivered? What is the significance of an article in a Soviet military journal? What if its conclusions are contradicted by another article in another, or even the same, journal? Intelligence analysts like to have a high degree of confidence in their findings; they like to maintain credibility within the bureaucracy. They are, therefore, wary of advancing conclusions based on other than hard information.

For this reason, the intelligence community has focused on Soviet capabilities rather than intentions. The United States can answer detailed questions about Soviet technical capabilities, e.g., the range, accuracy, and payload of Soviet weapons systems. But next to nothing is known about what is going on inside Soviet heads.

If such a void of knowledge were ever acceptable, it certainly is not today. When Soviet forces posed no clear threat to U.S. forces, the United States could live with misestimates of Soviet intentions; in an era when they do pose such a threat, it cannot. Only a mixture of hard and soft intelligence can improve U.S. understanding of Soviet strategic intentions.

Three vital areas need attention. First, the United States must improve its forecasting of Soviet strategic plans. Misunderstood Soviet priorities have been at the heart of some of the worst misestimates of Soviet forces in the past. SALT II would have given the United States

LES ASPIN (D.-Wisconsin) is a member of the House Armed Services Committee and served on the House Select and Permanent Select Committees on Intelligence, 1974-1981.

advance notice of the numerical size of Soviet strategic forces. If the United States is entering an era without SALT, with no treaty to make Soviet deployment priorities predictable, the gross misestimates of the past could reappear with even more perilous consequences.

Second, the United States needs a basis for devising negotiating strategies. Without a better understanding of the Soviet Union, the United States is very likely to miss opportunities and waste time in arms control. U.S. negotiating strategy will necessarily consist of offering proposals with little idea of their potential success.

Third, better intelligence is needed for developing U.S. strategic forces. More than ever, the United States must develop weapons with future Soviet capabilities in mind, and to do so, it must have a better understanding of Soviet plans. To determine what sorts of intelligence measures are needed, past intelligence errors must first be analyzed.

Mirror-Imaging

There is a widespread perception in the United States that throughout the postwar period the United States has consistently underestimated Soviet offensive capabilities. Alternatively, some contend that underestimations resulted from a naive belief in benign Soviet policy or from a misreading of the volume of resources Moscow was willing to devote to defense.

But a review of past estimates reveals that these were not the errors. Rather, the U.S. mistake was in the assumptions made about how the Soviet Union would allocate its defense spending. The problem repeatedly was "mirror-imaging," or the assumption that the Soviets would choose to expand their nuclear forces in the same way the United States had expanded its own. Thus:

- In the mid-1950s, Air Force intelligence predicted the Soviets would deploy 600-700 long-range bombers in order to reach the ultimate target, the United States. Instead, it later transpired that the Soviets were more concerned about targeting Western Europe and Turkey—and the U.S. B-47 bombers stationed there—not American population centers. The Soviets therefore devoted most of their production capacity to a medium-range force.

- In the late 1950s, some sections of U.S. intelligence predicted a massive Soviet effort to deploy intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching the United States.

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Again U.S. intelligence misunderstood Soviet strategic priorities, which stressed medium- and intermediate range, not long-range missiles.

• In the mid-1960s, there was another bombshell. After 1965 the Central Intelligence Agency expected the USSR to follow in U.S. footsteps by adding more warheads to each missile. This measure would be more cost effective and more attractive to the Soviets than a quantitative expansion of their missile force. The CIA also assumed that the Soviet Union would devote a large portion of its resources to the construction of an anti-ballistic missile system (ABM). Instead, the Soviets concentrated on ICBMs and did not deploy a multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) until 1974. Members of the U.S. SALT I negotiating team now believe that a unique opportunity was missed to limit or ban MIRV deployment—a restriction that would have contributed greatly to national security and strategic stability.

This pattern of understanding Soviet capabilities in weapon production but consistently misunderstanding Soviet intentions in weapon acquisition also plants a bureaucratic bombshell inside the American decision-making system. Every rival group within the system—the bomber pilots, the fighter jockeys, the missilemen, and the carrier admirals—produces its own interpretation of Soviet behavior to justify its claim for more money. Although a more coherent understanding of the Soviet Union cannot prevent bureaucratic infighting, it could help the president ride herd on unruly subordinates and steer clear of contradictory policies.

The Search for Clues

For more than two decades, America has collected intelligence on Soviet strategic weapons systems. Analysts scan this raw information for its current intelligence value. After incorporating the selected information in the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of that year, the original data are filed away. An analyst today wishing to review Soviet weapons development has ready access only to the finished NIEs, many of which are now known to be in error.

The CIA has occasionally engaged in a detailed historical analysis. One example was its 1975-1978 study of Soviet civil defense. For years policy makers had shown no interest in the topic, and intelligence estimates ignored it. When Soviet civil defense became a political issue, the intelligence community resolved

much of the controversy by recovering data from back files or by turning to sources that had long been available but never exploited.

Misunderstood Soviet priorities have been at the heart of some of the worst misestimates of Soviet forces in the past.

Retrospective analysis will always turn up more information than expected. Technical intelligence methods, such as photoreconnaissance and signal intelligence, require knowing what things to look for. If an analyst is not looking for a particular clue amid thousands of bits of information, he will not find it. Thus, information judged insignificant at the time it was gathered, but now potentially valuable, lies in the back files of intelligence agencies. Having proven that they can conduct useful selective retrospective studies, U.S. intelligence agencies now ought to use back files for a comprehensive retrospective analysis.

The United States knows today the results of Soviet decisions made in the 1960s, which could then only be guessed—often incorrectly. Analysts should now go back and find the preliminary evidence of subsequent Soviet actions. Knowing the sorts of clues that would have produced more accurate predictions in the 1970s, intelligence analysts could look for similar clues to improve predictions of Soviet actions in the 1980s. Hard data would complement soft data in identifying Soviet intentions.

For example, a strategic nuclear weapon takes 10-20 years to proceed from development to deployment. The nuances of each step of this cycle are very likely to be overlooked in the vast accumulation of technical intelligence data. Yet the USSR has now gone through two complete cycles of modern ICBM programs. The United States has mountains of data on these cycles. A thorough re-examination of this data would give the United States a much better idea of what early indicators of ICBM development look like. Analysts would become better equipped to discern Soviet strategic developments in the masses of data now being collected.

From a retrospective analysis some conclusions about how the Soviets make strategic decisions would emerge and would help the United States deal with the following crucial questions:

- How much of what the Soviets say about

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strategic issues in speeches, articles, and public statements should be taken seriously? To look back and see which statements—delivered by what official, when, through what medium, and to what audience—told the truth about Soviet weapons development would provide insight into the Soviet political process and would suggest what statements should be taken into account in future forecasts.

- What are Soviet decision-making procedures for different classes of weapons? The answer would aid U.S. decision makers in calculating when Soviet leaders are most likely to be in a position to respond to U.S. initiatives in arms control or arms escalation. It would help intelligence analysts anticipate new or improved weapons. It would also inform weapons designers how rapidly the Soviets tend to respond to improvements in U.S. forces.

- How do the Soviets incorporate new technology into their weapons? Is there a technological freeze at an early stage in the design process, or does the Soviet Union—like the United States—add design improvements along the way? Just a few years ago, U.S. intelligence predicted that the Soviets would not have accurate ICBMs until the mid- to late-1980s; the prediction was recently revised to the early- to mid-1980s. The initial prediction assumed that the Soviets would build a totally new missile before deploying new guidance systems. However, the Soviets have begun installing new guidance systems in existing SS-18 and SS-19 missiles. A retrospective analysis might have found that this sort of improvement is common in Soviet weapons development and thus prevented the error.

- How do political events shape weapons programs? A systematic examination of the past could help U. S. policy makers understand the relationship between international relations, internal politics, and weapons development in the Soviet Union. Did the 1962 Cuban missile crisis touch off the Soviet weapons build-up of the 1960s and 1970s, as some historians suggest? Or did the Soviet armament program have earlier origins? If the Cuban crisis did trigger the program, then the United States knows something about the long-term consequences of brinkmanship. Did Khrushchev handle his political troubles in the early 1960s by throwing more money to the military, and did Khrushchev's successors do the same?

Answers would suggest how future crises of regime and succession in the USSR may affect the Soviet defense budget.

To be sure, retrospective analysis cannot eliminate all uncertainty regarding questions as fundamental as the politics of weapons decisions. But it can establish a firm framework for judging those questions by using the available evidence as systematically and comprehensively as possible. Such a framework could raise the strategic debate above the current level of aggressive speculation. Fundamental disagreement over Soviet strategic intentions would undoubtedly remain, but U.S. leaders would at least have a foundation of data on which to evaluate competing hypotheses.

It is important to remember that intelligence agencies are by no means the sole source of intelligence. Many of the intelligence community's problems stem from the weakened condition of Soviet studies in U.S. universities. The few Russian linguists available to study the enormous body of literature at hand often face unemployment because the United States has not managed to use them effectively. The linguist shortage is even more pronounced for non-Russian languages spoken in the Soviet Union. The creation of a government-supported research institute on the Soviet Union is a proposal worth considering. The United States should also do a better job of tapping the wealth of knowledge available from the thousands of former Soviet citizens who have immigrated to this country.

Leslie H. Gelb, former director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, has suggested that regular contacts be established between senior U.S. and Soviet officials, in addition to the diplomatic contacts they now have. Such meetings would enable senior officials on both sides to obtain a direct, personal appreciation of the men whose actions often influence their own.

Finally, while the physical volume of data is probably largest on strategic forces, the United States faces the same kind of difficulties in understanding Soviet intentions in other areas—such as the projection of force outside their borders—where collected data has never been subjected to comprehensive review. The United States should undertake the same kind of retrospective study in each important area of superpower relations. But the strategic area is where the United States needs most urgently the answers that a retrospective analysis of past Soviet intentions and actions can provide.