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Perle's Distrust Shapes U.S. Policy

Assistant Defense Secretary Suspicious of Pacts With Soviets

By Fred Hiatt
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Richard N. Perle, who did as much as any American to doom detente during the 1970s, thinks that the Soviet Union is "a place where everyone lies all the time."

As the Reagan administration resumes a dialogue with the Soviets, that opinion may be crucial. Despite his relatively low-ranking job as assistant secretary of defense for international security policy—and despite being a Democrat in a Republican administration—Perle has had more influence on policy toward the Soviet Union during the past four years than any other administration official, according to experts in and out of government.

Perle was the intellectual force behind U.S. arms-control positions so stringent that President Reagan's first secretary of state, Alexander M. Haig Jr., labeled them "not negotiable" and "absurd." Perle was the architect of a campaign to restrict the flow of western technology to the Soviet Union, and he played a key role in shifting the debate over arms control to the question of Soviet untrustworthiness and "verification."

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Although western technology has not stopped flowing to the Soviet Union, Perle and others elevated what had been a non-issue into a central law enforcement concern policed by hundreds of new agents in the Customs, Commerce and Defense departments.

With that achievement, Perle angered U.S. businesses, European allies, U.S. ambassadors in Europe who resented his interference and top Commerce officials who loathed what they saw as his poaching. But Perle won many of the interdepartmental battles, again backed by Weinberger, despite the secretary's occasional dismay at how public the fights became.

"The provision about which there has been a great deal of dispute between the departments of Commerce and Defense—Section 10G of the Export Administration Act—is the section which I drafted," Perle said. "I think I know better than they do what I had in mind."

The same sense of certainty tends to silence those who might take a more moderate position on arms control—what Perle would call a more "naive" view—in an administration where no one dares look soft on the Soviets.

In 1983, for example, the administration was preparing a draft treaty to ban chemical weapons. Perle thought that the Soviet Union would cheat on such a treaty unless Washington insisted on far-reaching inspection procedures allowing U.S. officials to roam through the Soviet Union to check suspected chemical-arms factories.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed such inspection rules because they did not want their stocks subject to Soviet snooping. The Central Intelligence Agency feared that the Soviets would take advantage and pry into unrelated U.S. secrets.

State Department officials opposed Perle's proposal because they thought that the Soviets would never accept such rigid standards—and, worse, because the western allies knew that the Soviets would not accept them, and so the U.S. proposal would seem insincere.

At an interagency meeting at the State Department, Perle placed his opponents on the defensive.

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