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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

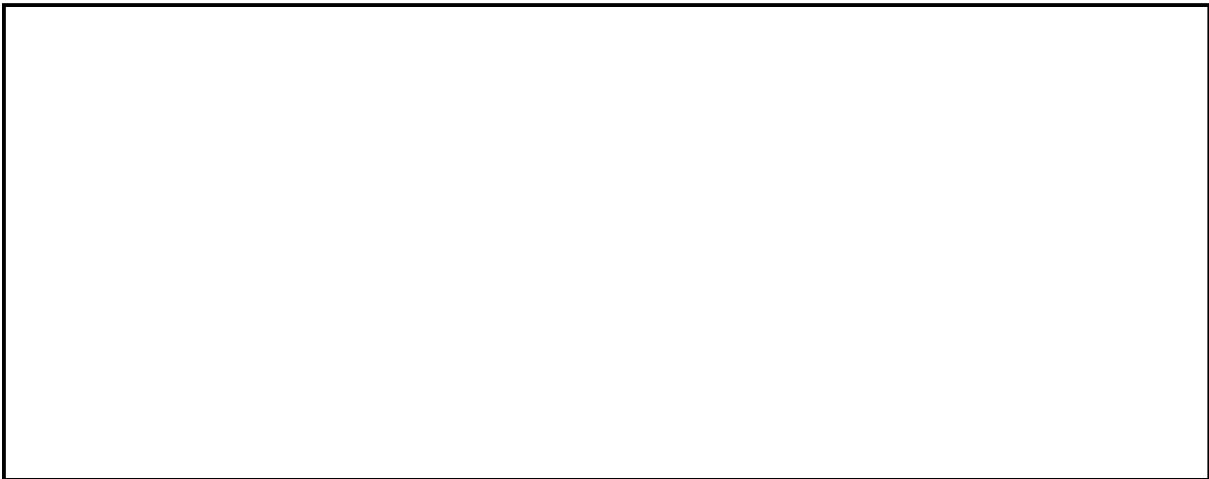
22 October 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE PANEL

SUBJECT: Estimating Soviet Intentions in the Strategic  
Weapons Field

NOTE

As Soviet strategic forces approach a size equivalent to that of US forces, Soviet intentions with respect to the future magnitude and character of such forces become a more acute issue for intelligence. This memorandum sets down in a summary way the main considerations which have figured in estimates on this subject. It is intended to provide the basis for a discussion by the panel which hopefully might produce suggestions for new approaches to such estimates.



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say, that they still believe they are involved in an irreconcilable conflict with the "capitalist" world, and in particular with the US as the most formidable non-Communist power. This does not mean that they intend at some time to initiate military action to resolve the conflict in their favor. They say that the historically inevitable revolutionary process will do this for them, but that in the interim they must have a strong defense to thwart the tendency of the desperate "imperialist" rulers to resort to aggression against the "progressive" countries. Even if they genuinely conceive the struggle in mainly political terms, they also believe that if they are seen to possess superior military strength political forces will work more strongly and quickly in their favor. Thus there is no reason to doubt that if they think it within their economic and technical capacity to surpass the US in modern strategic weaponry they will try to do so.

6. Such an aim would not be pursued to the exclusion of other priorities, however. We do not believe that the way to arrive at a view of the USSR's intentions is simply to measure its gross capability to accomplish a single goal. No society operates in this way because the sacrifice of other goals invokes costs and risks which the holders of power will see as

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unacceptable. And an attempt to concentrate all effort on building the largest possible nuclear threat to the US would bring nearer the greatest risk of all, nuclear war itself.

7. Soviet Attitudes Toward Nuclear War. Soviet military writings betray an understandable ambivalence toward nuclear war. Assertions that the USSR could and would prevail are, of course, usual. But one cannot infer from such writings that Soviet leaders really believe that nuclear war could be waged at a tolerable cost and with foreseeable consequences. Despite accusatory rhetoric, it is apparently believed that American leaders also see nuclear war as unacceptable. Yet there as here prudence argues for hedging. The Soviet leaders cannot believe that their state and system would be secure indefinitely if the US held a decisive superiority in strategic weapons. They evidently believe that, since US intentions are hostile the USSR must have forces at least large enough to deter pressures and the possibility of attack in some unforeseeable circumstances. While deterrence could presumably be achieved with forces smaller than those of the US, Soviet military planners will inevitably argue that larger forces will provide more reliable deterrence, and that, moreover, should deterrence fail, etc. Even if the concept of deterrence alone

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governs decisions affecting the size of Soviet forces, the tendency will be, though always in accordance with a judgment of acceptable priority and risk, to maximize and not to minimize the scale of strategic weapons programs.

8. Economic Capability. Clearly there is some reasonable upper limit to the amount of material resources the Soviets are able and willing to apply to strategic weapons programs. Over the last decade, expenditures for all military purposes have been in the range of 7-9 percent of annual GNP. This is a not inconsiderable burden for a country which is still backward in many ways. But if something in the neighborhood of this figure is what the Soviets have thought compatible with their other priorities, including investment for further growth of the economy, then they can presumably continue at such a rate. If they do so, they can make substantial additions to their already large strategic forces without undergoing excessive strain. By 1980, for example, they could triple their force of land-based ICBM's (i.e., to over 3000 missiles) by building launcher facilities at about the same rate of the last few years. More likely, however, they will want to transfer resources to other programs such as missile submarines and perhaps ABM's.

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9. The point is that general economic limitations do not provide a basis for estimating confidently over long time periods and within useful ranges what the size and mix of strategic forces will be. At some point obviously the growing maintenance costs of ever larger forces would dislocate established priorities and become unacceptable. Probably even before this the clamor of non-strategic elements of the armed services to retain their customary share of the military ruble would tend to slow down the growth of strategic forces. Adverse effects on the civilian economy and on living standards would generate other pressures. Nevertheless, economic capability is too rough an estimative tool. For example, it cannot give us the answer to such a key question as whether the SS-9 force will level off at, say 300 launchers, or will grow to twice that size.

10. Technical Capability. We have been aware at various times of failures and lags in certain Soviet weapons programs. The record of Soviet advanced weapons development over the last 20 years or so, however, tells us that generally the Soviets will be able to match our own development work within a few years. Thus we are obliged to say currently that the Soviets can get more accurate ICBM's, can develop a satisfactory MIRV system, and can make the Y-class submarine the equivalent of Polaris. Such

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achievements may sometimes take longer than we estimate, but we cannot assume technical limitations which would set well-defined upper limits to the size and quality of Soviet forces over any long period.

11. Nor can we assume that the Soviets will not be able to make certain technical advances before the US. We say that if these occur they are extremely unlikely to be of a breakthrough character, that is, capable of putting the US at a decisive disadvantage and denying time or possibility for effective counter-measures. In any case, the competition in dynamic advanced technology is in fact a factor which limits our ability to forecast the size and character of Soviet strategic forces.

12. Soviet Requirements. This is an approach which would estimate the future size of Soviet forces on the basis of a calculation of what would be required to cope adequately with US forces and a theoretical target system. There are manifest imprecisions in this method. Over an extended period the US posture is unlikely to remain static. More important, in order to attribute to the Soviet planners a particular requirements calculation it is necessary first to estimate with some exactness

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the inputs they would use -- the accuracy and reliability of Soviet systems, US warning capability and reaction times, the degree of assurance Soviet decision-makers would require. And finally there remains the larger question: requirements for what -- for deterrence at some level of assured destruction or for first strike? In the future, discerning what kind of contingencies the Soviets may be planning for will become even more difficult as the strategic situation is complicated by China's acquisition of nuclear weapons. The ramifications of what might at first blush seem an exact and systematic approach will soon lead the estimator on to soggy ground from which he is very unlikely to issue confident long-range predictions.

13. Historical Patterns. If we look at the record of past strategic weapons programs for clues to future decisions, the indications are inconclusive and contradictory. Deployment of some missile systems and aircraft has been halted at an early stage, presumably because the Soviets decided finally that these weapons were not effective or reliable enough, or that something better was in sight. In other cases (notably MRBM's, IRBM's, and medium bombers) numbers were deployed which exceeded considerably what we would have thought required for the presumed

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mission. In general, we have the impression that when the Soviets develop what they regard as a satisfactory system they are likely to deploy it in a quantity larger than we would think they required. But a vague rule that successful programs tend to be large does not help much to quantify future ones, especially for unproved systems about which we still know little.

14. The Usefulness of Indirect Approaches. What the indirect approaches to long-term estimates of Soviet strategic strength sketched above have in common is that they are often suggestive but never conclusive. They do help us to judge with reasonable confidence the general direction in which Soviet intentions and programs are likely to move. But they do not provide high confidence for estimates of future Soviet force goals within reasonable ranges, nor even for the specific criteria which govern Soviet force planning.

III. Some Concluding Propositions.

15. The Soviets' political outlook, their view of power relations, and their fears and ambitions lead them to desire a significant quantitative and qualitative advantage in strategic

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weaponry. Such an aim will be pursued, however, only within a framework of competing priorities, not as an exclusive or dominating goal.

16. Even if they were able to achieve an advantage, it does not follow that they could or would calculate that the deliberate launching of a nuclear attack on the US could be undertaken within acceptable limits of cost and risk. There is no basis for attributing to them the belief that nuclear war will be winnable in any rational sense in the foreseeable future.

17. Should the Soviets acquire what was seen as a significant margin of advantage in strategic weaponry, however, their policies would probably become more assertive. They might believe that in some critical confrontation such an apparent disparity of power would cause a failure of will on the part of the US or its allies, and permit the USSR to make important gains without war.



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19. The key judgment for US policy-makers is whether at any given moment developments in Soviet strategic forces are conceivable which would give the USSR a significant advantage before the US could take offsetting measures. On the whole, while intelligence cannot forecast confidently and exactly the size and character of Soviet strategic forces at long range, it is likely, given the size and diversity of US strategic forces, to be able to give sufficiently early warning of such a situation. How much hedging against worst case possibilities is desirable is for national leadership to decide.

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