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24 August 1959

To: Sherman Kent, AD/NE

Subject: Some Reflections on the Likelihood of Soviet Initiation
of War

Introduction

1. One problem to which no other defers in importance is the refinement and strengthening of estimates on the likelihood of Soviet initiation of war. This problem is assuming a new timeliness with the emergence of what some regard as the increasing possibility of a Soviet surprise attack after they had built a superiority in ICBM's, in the period of the mid-1960's, before the US has acquired a substantial invulnerable strategic missile capability.

2. This memorandum examines the question of initiation of war in the national policy and strategy of the USSR from the standpoint of Soviet policy calculations. It is consistent with, though it goes beyond, the reasoning set forth in the draft of NIE 11-4-59, Main Trends in Soviet Capabilities and Policies ¹⁹⁵¹⁻¹⁹⁶⁴. The state of the art of weaponry, and intelligence on Soviet military

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state of the art of weaponry, and intelligence on Soviet military

developments, are taken into account, but it will be argued that in the eyes of the Soviet leadership there is a broader and governing political and ideological context in which this "technical" military aspect, while important, is not supreme.

Objectives

3. It is often remarked that while Soviet tactics change, the fundamental objectives remain unchanged. None of us dispute that the Soviet leaders aspire to see Communism ultimately established throughout the world. But we must not focus on the Soviet goal of world Communism at the expense of attention to the more immediate and concrete challenges of Soviet policy. The primary operative aim is to maintain the security and power of the Soviet state. Beyond this, it is also an aim of Soviet policy to expand influence and power beyond the Communist Bloc in furtherance of aspirations to world hegemony, but only insofar as this objective can be attained without risking the Soviet regime and state. The fundamental operative objective, underlying and guiding Soviet political and military strategy, can therefore be stated to be: to advance the power of the USSR in whatever ways are most expedient so long as the survival of the Soviet power itself is not endangered.

4. The Soviet objective thus mirrors the fact that the Soviet leaders have decided deliberate initiation of general war

would not be in their interest so long as they would be endangered thereby. Secondly, it means further that the Soviet Union will seek to avoid serious risk of general war. Thirdly, it means that the Soviets will probably continue to pursue a policy of expansion of their influence and power by means short of war. They will probably continue to attempt to identify themselves with ideals widely held in the world -- ideals such as peace, disarmament, progress and national liberation and independence movements -- all of which they seek to contrast with alleged imperialist warmongering, arms race, reactionary policies, and colonialism. Finally, it is nonetheless true that within this general policy they will be alert to exploit counterdeterrence* when they consider the risks

* The term "counterdeterrence" seems useful to denote the neutralization of someone else's deterrent. The United States and the Soviet Union each maintain a strategic striking capability which serves as a deterrent to possible attacks upon itself by the other. This is mutual deterrence. However, this does not necessarily exclude strategic counterdeterrence, because the same capability which deters a direct Soviet attack on North America might no longer be effective to meet certain lesser challenges not directly and mortally threatening the US. If the credibility of our use of our strategic deterrent were undermined, the Soviets would have achieved counterdeterrence of the American deterrent for such situations.

to be low, especially in cases where aggression can be indirect. While generally avoiding a belligerent posture, the Soviet advertise their growing power, and we may expect boldly insinuated threats when they consider it appropriate. They may even come to decide upon deliberate initiation of limited wars in cases where the risks of general war seem low and indirect aggression could be masked to lull those in the world who are prone to overlook all but the most blatant Communist aggression.

Calculations in Policy-Making

5. It is unnecessary to analyse in full the respective roles of ideology and power politics in Soviet policy-making. For present purposes, for examining policy on war and peace, there is no divergence or discrepancy. Both the Communist ideology and purely power-political considerations place the criterion of calculated risk, cost, and gain at the foundation of any strategic initiative. Communist doctrine certainly does inject unusually strong hostility and suspicion into Soviet policy-making, but Marxism-Leninism does not propel the Soviet Union toward the embrace of war or the witting assumption of great risks. Why should the Soviet leaders, confident in moving with the sweep of history, court disaster by a premature gamble?

6. In developing political and military strategies, the Soviet leaders are guided by their estimate of the world situation, of the balance of power between the Soviet and Western blocs. Such estimates are made by all powers, but an important difference characterizes Soviet strategy. Marxism-Leninism claims monopoly on a uniquely scientific means of estimating the situation and of selecting the appropriate strategy. In Soviet terms, this estimating process is called "the calculation of the relation of forces." Lenin once called it "the main point in Marxism and Marxian tactics," and on another occasion he noted that "by a strict calculation of the mass forces and mutual class relations we have determined the expediency of one or another form of struggle". Without dwelling on the political role of this calculation, it may be worthwhile to point out in passing that the famous "general (Party) line" -- there can be only one correct line or policy at any given time -- is determined by the calculation of the relation of forces in that particular situation. This estimate forms the basis for decisions on war or peace, on advance or retreat, on direct or indirect offensive or defensive action. The political "deviations" represent erroneous un-Marxist calculations: the "Left" deviation or "adventurism" is an underestimation of the hostile forces; the Right deviation or "opportunism" is an overestimation of the hostile forces. Adventurism is taking an unwarranted risk, one

which the objective situation does not permit; opportunism is overlooking and not seizing upon the potentiality for a gain or advance which the objective relation of forces does permit.

7. What are the "forces" which are calculated? Broadly, they are the elements which we implicitly include in our political concept of "the balance of power." Khrushchev himself has defined the relation of forces as "a broad conception which embraces political, economic and military factors." The relation of forces in the world arena was until recently described in terms of a "capitalist encirclement" of the Soviet Union, though ever since 1947 the Soviets have spoken of the socialist and capitalist "camps." At the XXI Party Congress this year, the Soviets claimed that the shift that is occurring in the world relation of forces is decisive and irrevocable. The Soviets have also now explicitly concluded that capitalist encirclement has ended and been replaced by a rough parity of the power of the West and of the Communist Bloc. Thus, from a somewhat different angle, the Soviets too have come to judge the present world situation as one of mutual deterrence. Under the prevailing balance of forces, the cardinal role of Soviet military and political strategy is seen as deterring the West from launching war and also counterdetering the West from effective reactions to Communist advances short of war. However, with their conception of the potentialities of various political, propaganda,

economic, and military forms of advancing Soviet power short of general war, they by no means see a stalemate respecting anything other than use of strategic nuclear military power. It is also an important Marxian principle that the future relation of forces can be affected and manipulated by the careful exploitation of latent potentialities in the present, and by efforts to prevent the opponent from utilizing his opportunities.

8. Confident in moving toward eventual power superiority and ultimate victory, the Soviet leaders avoid any adventuristic strategy which would prematurely lead to total struggle at a time when victory was not assured by the alignment of forces. Whether despite or because of these ideological influences in Soviet policy-making, questions of war and peace are decided essentially on the basis of calculations of relative power and of relative risk.

9. Mutual deterrence has resulted from the acquisition of global thermonuclear striking power by the United States and the Soviet Union. Mutual deterrence has been described as a "delicate balance of terror." But while this balance is indeed insecure, and by no means inevitably enduring, it is not fragile. The risks and consequences of a global thermonuclear holocaust are recognized by the Soviet leaders, who strive to avoid any "adventurist" gamble.

The importance in Soviet policy of the overall balance of power, the "relation of forces in the world arena", militates against a preoccupation with purely military solutions. The Soviet leaders are not poised to unleash their -- and our -- military power as soon as the theoretical probability of military victory crosses some calibrated balance of 50% or 70% or indeed perhaps even 90%. In the Communist view, history can not be made hostage to the mathematical computations of some "communivac".

10. Thus total nuclear war -- though not necessarily other, limited, forms of war -- seems ever less likely as a rational tool for the Soviet Union to advance its position. Of course, irrational decision is not inconceivable. But more dangerous, because more probable, is the possibility of a "war by miscalculation," which could occur in any of a number of possible ways. One very important one, often noted, is the possibility that local hostilities (nuclear or "conventional") might be expanded in the vortex of actions and reactions into a general nuclear war. Perhaps even more important is the case of miscalculation which could arise from the danger of one side incorrectly believing the enemy to be about to launch a surprise attack, and therefore launching a preemptive blow in order to seize the initiative and get in the first strike.

11. In short, we see that while general nuclear war is all too possible, it is not probable as a strategy fashioned to advance Soviet power. The flexibility in determining concrete Soviet objectives, depending upon concrete opportunities and constraints, evokes flexibility in their strategic thinking, doctrine, and plans. It also extends to flexibility in selection of political or military means, and in selection among military means if such are to be employed at all.

12. While concluding that the Soviets will seek to avoid general war, it is necessary to consider whether there may arise circumstances under which the Soviet could conclude that "initiation" of general war had become more expedient than not doing so.

The Preemptive Strike

13. There occurred, in early 1955, a significant innovation in Soviet strategy and war planning associated with the increased importance accorded to surprise. At that time, the Soviets adopted the conclusion that mere repulse of an attempted surprise attack upon the Soviet Union might be insufficient, and that if an enemy were clearly about to attack the Soviet Union, a preemptive strike should be made. As there has been some confusion on this point, let us be clear that the Soviets explicitly distinguished this

preemptive strike from preventive war -- it is to be undertaken only if the enemy should himself attempt to make a surprise attack. A Soviet preemptive attack is contemplated for a situation which is not a time of Soviet choosing or the result of a deliberate planned buildup for optimum Soviet position for war, but represents a time when the Soviets believe that they must act or forfeit the strategic initiative to us. It would not represent or reflect Soviet conviction that requirements for the total neutralization of the Western retaliatory force had been met. It would in fact be a desperate last-minute effort to seize the initiative from the enemy who is irrevocably committed to launch an imminent attack or already in the process of doing so. This preemptive strategy has never been discussed in the open military press, except to be denied in propaganda, but it has been referred to on a number of occasions in secret Soviet sources -- always in terms of the concept as outlined above. "Preventive war" -- or simply deliberate initiation of hostilities -- would of course not be discussed even in the type of classified Soviet sources which have discussed preemptive attack. But in considering available indications of Soviet military thinking, the concept of preemptive attack cannot be assumed to represent plans or intentions to prepare for a surprise attack on the West.

The Deliberate First Strike

14. A decision to embark on a policy of building up maximum ICBM capability for a powerful surprise attack to destroy the US, and thus dispose of capitalism, could be made by the Soviet leaders, but only if they concluded from their calculations that there were an overwhelming probability of destroying our retaliatory military power without suffering unacceptable losses. The tricky points are, of course, to determine what is an "overwhelming probability", and what are "acceptable losses".

15. In evaluating the possibility that the Soviet leaders might conclude that such a probability was overwhelming, we must not use our own defense assumptions. It is prudent and proper for the defense planner to guard against the enemy's maximum gross capability. Doubts, and there are inevitably many (in terms of proficiency, probable aborts, and the like, as well as less than complete certainty about the size and capability of the enemy force) must be resolved in the attacker's favor in order to meet the possible enemy threat. But the attacker, if he is calculating the probability of destroying virtually all of the retaliatory strike capability of a powerful adversary, must resolve such doubts in the favor of the defense. Of course, the Soviet must be presumed to have good knowledge of our order of battle, though they can

never be sure they know about it all. In short, in calculating probability of success in a sudden massive assault, the Soviets if anything will probably be impressed by our full retaliatory capability plus a safety margin nurtured by doubt. This inhibition on reaching a strike decision is heavily reinforced by the Soviet proclivity not to consider surprise as ensuring a decisive outcome if other factors are at all in doubt. Finally, as noted earlier, there is an ideological tendency not to gamble everything on a probability calculation which could be entirely upset by any one of many incalculables.

16. The problem of achieving a probability of near-complete destruction of Western retaliatory capabilities is greatly complicated by ^{the} a variety of such forces involved and by their widely dispersed deployment. Not only will ICBMs and IRBMs supplement SAC's bombers and the naval carrier task forces, but Polaris IRBM-firing submarines will be added, and finally even the major part of our tactical fighters and light bombers located in numerous bases in Western Europe and elsewhere in the Eurasian periphery have the capability of one-way missions delivering nuclear weapons on almost all areas of the Soviet Union.

17. Notwithstanding these considerations, let us for purposes of this analysis assume that the Soviets could -- if we

built only a relatively small and vulnerable ICBM force in the next three or four years, and kept SAC on the ground -- conclude that by a crash effort over the next few years they could get an overwhelming probability of destroying, let us say, roughly 75% of our strategic retaliatory capability by a sudden ICBM and IRBM strike, supplemented by bombers. This option would be open only for the few years before the US acquires a substantial and relatively invulnerable retaliatory capability, with hardened ICBM sites and the Polaris missile system. Also, it should be noted, the option is not one to recommend itself on the basis: "Well, we'll build up on the chance it will look attractive at the time and then take another close look before really deciding whether to use it". The cost would be very great both in terms of curtailed Soviet economic growth and of possible instability, and of alerting the West to greater defensive preparations which would geometrically increase Soviet attack requirements. There would be no profit in such a buildup unless the Soviet leaders were fairly determined that they would use it for a strike. Even if a superior force were achieved, the advantage would soon fade away as the US built up and dispersed its own ICBM capabilities.

18. But let us suppose that they thought the chances of achieving the 75% knockout were good enough to justify the effort on grounds of that criterion. Would the predictable consequences

of this strike be within the bounds of "acceptable losses"? Those who would incline to answer in the affirmative tend to argue that the Communists are ruthless and would sacrifice 50 or 100 million Soviet citizens if need be to attain world domination. The Soviet leaders, indeed, have a standard of values in which humanitarianism is low. Nonetheless, it is very doubtful that they would consider such losses as acceptable, for a number of reasons. One is that the consequences for the social and political fabric of Soviet society -- and hence the consequences for their own regime -- would be ominous and incalculable. Another would be the relative weakening of the USSR vis-a-vis all other countries than the US and such allies as also had been devastated. China, India, Sweden, Argentina would be the new great powers of the world. Thirdly, there are the genuine expectations of gradual victory of communism -- at least as pertinent as Bolshevik ruthlessness, and as ideologically powerful. And finally, the military balance projected into the future, even though conservatively for us and liberally for them, does not provide the kind of assurances of probability of destruction of our nuclear power which yield even as good odds as those cited above for illustrative purposes.

19. Thus a Soviet decision to plan a buildup for a deliberate initiation of general war is highly unlikely because (a) the prospect of achieving adequate capabilities to insure

acceptable losses is very unpromising, (b) they are advancing their power in the world by other means (and they believe that even if there were setbacks that they are foreordained to win ultimate victory without war), and (c) apart from the above technical-military and ideological considerations, self-preservation is accorded a higher priority in Soviet policy than expansion of Communist control, so that the military calculated risks and ideological compulsions are in fact governed by political realism.

20. For all these reasons, some of them elaborated earlier in greater detail, this alternative probably does not rank even as an active candidate for Soviet choice -- although until it is clearly disproved by hard intelligence we are obliged to bear it in mind as not inconceivable.

The Minimum Deterrent

21. Is it the only alternative Soviet national strategic concept to the one we estimate at present? If it is to the "left" of the one we see now in operation, is there another, one perhaps more favorable to the prospects for peace and gradual accommodation, to the "right"?

22. The idea of "minimum deterrence", if by that we mean something which reduces the national objective to deterrence, can

be discounted as a possible Soviet policy. Not only would a military capability limited to the minimum for deterrence fail to provide the variety of military capabilities necessary to a forceful and broad-gauged foreign policy -- which alone would prove bankrupt in the event of general war. Deterrence of general war may be not only one's goal but also one's firm expectation -- but it cannot be raised to the level of natural law. Deterrence cannot be absolutely guaranteed to be an absolute guarantee. If the Soviets were to settle for a minimum deterrent force, let us say a few hundred ICBMs, then if faced with general war they would not only fail to have acceptable losses in prospect, but they would indeed virtually be assured of unacceptable losses. Just as one does not invest all his income in savings and life insurance, so he does not -- if he is prudent -- invest the minimum to pay for his funeral.

23. Nonetheless, minimum deterrence -- which at least allows prospects for gain through continuing political warfare -- must be ranked ahead of the one-chance buildup for the all-on-a-chance strike. On balance, neither seems really even in the running so far as the Soviet leaders are concerned.

24. The Soviet military and political leaders would probably not be content with a deterrent force, because they would see the need if a war should come to employ all forms of their military power including strategic strikes to reduce the US long-range strike capability, even though the US force could have destroyed most of its original objectives. On the other hand, they would weigh added capabilities in terms of declining marginal increments balanced against their expense to other political and economic programs which they consider will shape the course of history. Consequently, so long as a sure antiseptic first-strike force is not attainable, they will probably not procure the maximum technically attainable missile force, but will build a force for deterrence and aggressive counter-deterrence, plus hedging against the unlikely eventuality of general war.

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