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The Soviet "War Scare"

President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board

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Never, perhaps, in the postwar decades has the situation in the world been as explosive and, hence, more difficult and unfavorable as in the first half of the 1980's.

Mikhail Gorbachev
February 1986

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary

PART I: U.S. Handling of the "War Scare": The Estimative
Process

Early Perceptions of the Soviet War Scare

British Assessment

U.S. Perceptions Entrenched

An Alternative Opinion

The Rebuttal

New Information

Perceptions Evolve. . .

But Doubts Remain

The Last Word

The Record Muddied

Conclusions: The Estimative Process

And Unfinished Business. . .

PART II: The Soviet "War Scare"

Introduction

Origins of the Scare

Vulnerability of Soviet Nuclear Forces to a US
Surprise Attack

Soviet Analysis of the US-USSR Strategic Balance

The "War Scare"

Late 1970's: Changing Soviet Perceptions of US
Intentions

1980: Heightened Concern

1981: Reducing Vulnerabilities

1982: Strategic Preparations

1983: Nearing the Precipice

Growing Pessimism, Additional
Precautions

Mounting Tensions

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Able Archer 83

1983-1984: Winter of Crisis

Summer 1984: Preparations for War

Autumn 1984: Reason Restored

The Legacy

Implications for Today

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Executive Summary

From the late 1970's to the mid-1980's, the military forces and intelligence services of the Soviet Union were redirected in ways that suggested that the Soviet leadership was seriously concerned about the possibility of a sudden strike launched by the United States and its NATO allies. These changes were accompanied by leadership statements -- some public, but many made in secret meetings -- arguing that the US was seeking strategic superiority in order to be able to launch a nuclear first strike. These actions and statements are often referred to as the period of the "war scare."

The changes in Soviet military and intelligence arrangements included: improvements of Warsaw Pact combat readiness (by recalling reservists, lengthening service times, increasing draft ages, and abolishing many draft deferments), an unprecedented emphasis on civil defense exercises, an end of military support for gathering the harvest (last seen prior to the 1968 Czech invasion), the forward deployment of unusual numbers of SPETSNAZ forces, increased readiness of Soviet ballistic missile submarines and forward deployed nuclear capable aircraft, massive military exercises that for the first time emphasized surviving and responding to a sudden enemy strike, a new agreement among Warsaw Pact countries that gave Soviet leaders authority in the event of an attack to unilaterally commit Pact forces, creation within the GRU of a new directorate to run networks of illegal agents abroad, an urgent KGB (and some satellite services') requirement that gave the highest priority the gathering of politico-military indicators of US/NATO preparations for a sudden nuclear attack, establishment of a special warning condition to alert Soviet forces that a surprise enemy strike using weapons of mass destruction was in progress, and the creation of a special KGB unit to manage a

computer program (the VRYAN model) that would objectively measure the correlation of forces and warn when Soviet relative strength had declined to the point that a preemptive Soviet attack might be justified.

During the November 1983 NATO "Able Archer" nuclear release exercise, the Soviets implemented military and intelligence activities that previously were seen only during actual crises. These included: placing Soviet air forces in Germany and Poland on heightened alert,

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The meaning of these events obviously was of crucial importance to American and NATO policymakers. If they were simply parts of a Soviet propaganda campaign designed to intimidate the US, deter it from deploying improved weapons, and arouse US domestic opposition to foreign policy initiatives, then they would not be of crucial significance. If they reflected an internal Soviet power struggle -- for example, a contest between conservatives and pragmatists, or an effort to avoid blame for Soviet economic failures by pointing to (exaggerated) military threats -- then they could not be ignored, but they would not imply a fundamental change in Soviet strategy. But if these events were expressions of a genuine belief on the part of Soviet leaders that the US was planning a nuclear first strike, causing the Soviet military to prepare for such an eventuality -- by, for example, readying itself for a preemptive strike of its own -- then the "war scare" was a cause for real concern.

During the past year, the President's Foreign Intelligence

Advisory Board has carefully reviewed the events of that period to learn what we (the U.S. intelligence community) knew, when we knew it, and how we interpreted it. The Board has read hundreds of documents, conducted more than 75 interviews with American and British officials, and studied the series of National Intelligence Estimates (NIE's) and other intelligence assessments that have attempted over the last six years to interpret the war scare data. Additionally, we have offered our own interpretation of the war scare events.

We believe that the Soviets perceived that the correlation of forces had turned against the USSR, that the US was seeking military superiority, and that the chances of the US launching a nuclear first strike -- perhaps under cover of a routine training exercise -- were growing. We also believe that the US intelligence community did not at the time, and for several years afterwards, attach sufficient weight to the possibility that the war scare was real. As a result, the President was given assessments of Soviet attitudes and actions that understated the risks to the United States. Moreover, these assessments did not lead us to reevaluate our own military and intelligence actions that might be perceived by the Soviets as signaling war preparations.

In two separate Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIE's) in May and August of 1984, the intelligence community said: "We believe strongly that Soviet actions are not inspired by, and Soviet leaders do not perceive, a genuine danger of imminent conflict or confrontation with the United States." Soviet statements to the contrary were judged to be "propaganda."

The Board believes that the evidence then did not, and certainly does not now, support such categoric conclusions. Even without the benefit of subsequent reporting and looking at the 1984 analysis of then available information, the tone of the intelligence judgments was not adequate to the needs of the President.

A strongly stated interpretation was defended by explaining away facts inconsistent with it and by failing to subject that interpretation to a comparative risk assessment. In time, analysts' views changed. In an annex to a February 1988 NIE, analysts declared: "During the late 1970's and early 1980's there were increasing Soviet concerns about the drift in superpower relations, which some in the Soviet leadership felt indicated an increased threat of war and increased likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons. These concerns were shaped in part by a Soviet perception that the correlation of forces was shifting against the Soviet Union and that the United States was taking steps to achieve military superiority." The Soviets' VRYAN program was evaluated as part of an effort to collect data and subject it to computer analysis in a way that would warn the USSR when the US had achieved decisive military superiority.

Reporting from a variety of 3.3(b)(1) sources, including Oleg Gordiyevskiy (a senior KGB officer who once served as second in command in the London Residency and who has since defected to Great Britain), taken as a whole, strongly indicates that there was in fact a genuine belief among key members of the Soviet leadership that the United States had embarked on a program of achieving decisive military superiority that might prompt a sudden nuclear missile attack on the USSR.

Although some details of that belief became known only recently, there was at the time evidence -- from secret directives and speeches by Soviet authorities -- that a major change in Soviet political and strategic thinking had probably occurred. For example, we knew by 1984 at the latest that a Soviet general had interpreted President Carter's PD-59 as preparing US strategic forces for a preemptive strike, that the Head of the KGB's First Chief Directorate, General Kryuchkov had told key subordinates that the KGB must work to prevent the US from launching a surprise attack, that KGB and Czechoslovak intelligence Residencies had been

tasked to gather information on US preparations for war, and that missile submarines had been placed on shortened readiness times.

Many of these facts were summarized in a memorandum from the National Intelligence Officer for Warning (NIO/W) to DCI William Casey in June 1984, a memo that Casey then forwarded to the President.

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Neither the NIO/W nor the [REDACTED] altered the official position of the intelligence community as expressed in the May 1984 SNIE and as reasserted, in almost identical language, in the August 1984 SNIE.

Analysts will always have legitimate disagreements over the meaning of inevitably incomplete and uncertain intelligence reports. Moreover, part of the confidence that PFIAB has in its own assessment of the war scare derives from information not known at the time. Our purpose in presenting this report is not so much to criticize the conclusions of the 1984 SNIE's as to raise questions about the ways these estimates were made and subsequently reassessed.

In cases of great importance to the survival of our nation, and especially where there is important contradictory evidence, the Board believes that intelligence estimates must be cast in terms of alternative scenarios that are subjected to comparative risk assessments. This is the critical defect in the war scare episode. By "alternative scenarios," we mean a full statement of each major, possible interpretation of a set of intelligence indicators. In this case, these scenarios might have included the following:

1. Soviet leaders had not changed their strategic thinking but were attempting by means of propaganda and intelligence deceptions to slow the US military build-up, prevent the deployment of

new weapons, and isolate the US from its allies.

2. Soviet leaders may or may not have changed their strategic thinking, but a power struggle among Kremlin factions and the need to deflect blame for poor economic conditions made it useful to exaggerate the military intentions and capabilities of the US.

3. Soviet leaders had changed their strategic thinking and, in fact, believed that the US was attempting to gain decisive strategic superiority in order, possibly, to launch a nuclear first strike.

By "comparative risk assessment," we mean assigning two kinds of weights to each scenario: one that estimates the probability that the scenario is correct and another that assesses the risk to the United States if it wrongly rejects a scenario that is, in fact, correct.

In 1984, one might reasonably have given the highest probability of being correct to the first or second scenario (even though, as we argue in this report, we believe that would have been an error). But having done this, it would surely have been clear even then that if the third scenario was in fact correct and we acted as if it were wrong, the risks to the United States would have been very great -- greater than if we had rejected a correct first or second scenario. As it happened, the military officers in charge of the Able Archer exercise minimized this risk by doing nothing in the face of evidence that parts of the Soviet armed forces were moving to an unusual level of alert. But these officers acted correctly out of instinct, not informed guidance, for in the years leading up to Able Archer they had received no guidance as to the possible significance of apparent changes in Soviet military and political thinking.

By urging that some major estimates be based on a comparative

assessment of fully developed alternative scenarios, we are not arguing for "competitive analyses" or greater use of dissenting opinions. An intelligence estimate is not the product of a governmental debating society in which institutional rivals try to outdo one another in their display of advocacy skills. We are arguing instead for adopting the view that since it is very hard to understand the present, much less predict the future, it is a mistake to act as if we can. On the most important issues, it is difficult if not impossible to say with confidence that we know what is happening or will happen. We can, however, say that there are a small number of possibilities, each of which has a (rough) probability and each of which presents to the policymaker likely risks and opportunities.

When analysts attempt to arrive at a single strong conclusion, they not only run the risk of being wrong, they run two additional and perhaps more worrisome risks. They are likely to underestimate the possibility of change (the safest prediction is always that tomorrow will be like today) and they are likely to rely on mirror-imaging (our adversaries think the way we do). In this era of unprecedented, breakneck change, the first error grows in importance. And since we cannot know what individuals will next hold power in the USSR or when, it is an especially grave error to assume that since we know the US is not going to start World War III, the next leaders of the Kremlin will also believe that -- and act on that belief.

In short, our criticism of the 1984 SNIE's, though in part substantive, is in larger part procedural. We do not think there is any simple organizational change that will correct that procedure. If strategic intelligence estimates are to give policymakers a better sense of risks and opportunities, it will only happen if policymakers insist that that is what they want and refuse to accept anything less.

This review of the war scare period also suggests another lesson. It is quite clear to the Board that during the critical years when the Kremlin was reassessing US intentions, the US intelligence community did not react quickly to or think deeply about the early signs of that change. The war scare indicators began appearing in the early 1980's; the first estimate to address this was not written until 1984. At the time it was written, the US knew very little about Kremlin decisionmaking.

33(b)(1)

the SNIE authors wrote confidently about "Soviet leadership intentions."

We recommend that the National Security Council oversee a reassessment of the intelligence community's understanding of Soviet military and political decisionmaking, both in general terms and in light of the judgments made in the 1984 estimates. Our own leadership needs far better intelligence reporting on and assessments of the mindset of the Soviet leadership -- its ideological/political instincts and perceptions. As part of this reassessment, it should exploit the current opening in the Iron Curtain to interview past and present East Bloc and Soviet officials about the sources and consequences of the war scare in order to obtain a better understanding of the perceptions and inner conflicts of Soviet decisionmakers.

Finally, we suggest that the US review the way in which it manages military exercises, its own intelligence collection efforts,

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to insure that these are carried out in a way that is responsive to indications and warning for war.

In 1983 we may have inadvertently placed our relations with the Soviet Union on a hair trigger. Though the current thaw in US-Soviet relations suggests that neither side is likely in the near

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term to reach for that trigger, events are moving so fast that it would be unwise to assume that Soviet leaders will not in the future act, from misunderstanding or malevolence, in ways that puts the peace in jeopardy.

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