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R.S.M. #5

BASIC SOVIET IDEAS ON WAR AND THE PEACETIME USES OF MILITARY POWER

1. This memorandum has been prepared in support of NIE 11-4-62. It deals with Soviet strategic thought on the roles of Soviet military power in time of general peace. The memorandum has three parts: basic Soviet attitudes toward war; Soviet management of political and military crises, including the problem of local war; and the Soviet reappraisal of the strategic situation of the USSR and of steps to be taken to improve the Soviet position.

2. This memorandum will be followed shortly by another (also prepared in support of NIE 11-4-62) which deals with Soviet strategic thought on the problems of preparing for and fighting a general war.

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6 November 1962

R.S.M. #5

SUBJECT: Basic Soviet Ideas on War and the Peacetime Uses
of Military Power

Attitude Toward General War

1. It is our estimate that the present Soviet regime will wish to avoid general war in the coming years. We believe that while the regime will continue to prepare its forces to fight a general war, it will not initiate war unless faced with the prospect of loss of a vital national interest, or if a Western attack on the USSR seemed imminent, or if the regime came to the conclusion that the USSR could deliver a massive surprise attack against the West with near impunity. We do expect that strategic power will continue to play a central role in Soviet foreign policy, that strategic threats will be used to advance Soviet national interests, and that the USSR may at times embark on daring though limited political and military ventures. But we believe that Soviet initiatives will continue to be taken only on the calculation that the risks involved--whether high or low--can be kept under continuous control by the USSR leadership.

2. There is nothing in current Soviet ideology or strategic doctrine to suggest that the USSR contemplates launching a premeditated nuclear war against the West in the foreseeable future. Communist doctrine injects hostility and conflict into Soviet policy, but it does not propel the USSR toward general war. The present regime in the past six years or so has remolded its fundamental ideological positions to make unambiguous--even under Chinese pressure--its aversion to war between East and West. Thus, in recent years, public expressions of basic Soviet policy have stressed the possibility and need to prevent a general war from erupting in the future. Soviet spokesmen have repeatedly asserted that a world war, which would inevitably be a thermonuclear conflict, should be avoided because it would bring unprecedented destruction to all mankind. They have conceded that the world Communist

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movement would be gravely set back by such a war, and have even betrayed uncertainty over whether the USSR might emerge from it as a major world power. And they have insisted, to the dismay of the Chinese Communists, that war between states is not necessary for the victory of the Communist movement.

3. Soviet leaders--notably Khrushchev--have also voiced optimism about the future and confidence in their ability to advance their national position and the world Communist movement without resort to general war. "When the USSR becomes the first industrial power and the socialist system is finally transformed into the decisive factor of world development," Khrushchev said at the 22nd CPSU Congress, "the threat of a world war will have passed forever." This radical change in the international situation, the Soviets say, could take place within ten years.

4. At the same time, Soviet optimism has been tempered by the warning that there is a real danger that the imperialists might yet unleash a thermonuclear war. Public statements made over the past year have reflected somewhat less optimism as regards the unlikelihood of war than was manifest in 1959 and 1960. They sometimes assert that the United States is "preparing" to initiate a general war, and they make the exclusion of war largely dependent upon the deterrent effect of Soviet military might, calling for the continued strengthening of the Soviet armed forces "as long as there is a danger of war."

5. The pragmatic basis for their expressed aversion toward war is the Soviet leadership's judgment that general war cannot be an expedient or feasible course of action with the present composition and correlation of military forces among the major powers. Although the Soviets are still vigorously building their military power, both offensive and defensive, they almost certainly do not count on acquiring at any foreseeable point in time an advantage so decisive as to permit them to launch general war under conditions which would not gravely menace their regime and society. Objectively, there is little prospect for their achieving a decisive overall military superiority in the next five years, however great an effort they may make, in view of the magnitude, reliability, and low vulnerability of the existing and programmed U.S. strategic attack forces. Hence, excluding the possibility of the emergence of a more adventuristic leadership given to grave miscalculation,

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we surmise that the Soviets will not choose to risk their entire future by hazarding a devastating nuclear war.

6. The preference of the Soviet regime to pursue its foreign policy objectives without resort to general war does not, of course, provide assurance that the regime might not under certain conditions elect to initiate war against the West. If at some point the Soviets became convinced that general war was imminent, and could not be avoided short of capitulation of a vital national interest, they would probably initiate war to deny the enemy the advantages of initiative, irrespective of the real power balance.

7. Vital Soviet interests are not static. They vary with changes in time, personalities, the overall political situation, and the balance of power. They are not always clearcut, and there may be divisions in judgment among Soviet leaders as to which interests are vital. The hard core vital interest is, of course, the USSR itself. We assume that most of the East European satellites are regarded as constant vital interests. We are not certain whether--or to what degree--Albania and the Soviet allies to the East are now regarded by the USSR as vital interests, the prospective loss of which would lead to direct Soviet military intervention or general war. However, we do not believe that there now exists any real estate at a considerable distance from the Bloc, the loss of which would be interpreted as a loss of a vital Soviet interest. Soviet conduct in the recent crisis makes it clear that the USSR does not regard Cuba as a vital interest.

8. The Soviets may have forsaken world war as an effective instrument of policy. Yet strategic military power continues to play a central role in Soviet foreign policy. To prevent the West from taking military action against the USSR and its allies is, of course, the paramount mission of the country's military power in peacetime. The Soviets also see a variety of indirect uses of Soviet military power in support of foreign policy goals. In addition to deterring direct nuclear attack, they regard their forces as a means to deter lesser provocations; to inhibit the West from intervening militarily in areas outside the bloc; to deter the West from undertaking initiatives to check developments adverse to Western interests; to maintain security within the Bloc; to lend weight to their political demands in cold-war bargaining; and to demonstrate the success and growing power of their cause.

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9. The Soviet Union has made indirect use of its military power to promote the erosion of the NATO alliance and the expansion of Soviet political influence far beyond its borders. Moscow has threatened European (among other) countries which house U.S. military bases with extermination in the event of war. Elsewhere, they have sold weapons to underdeveloped countries with the expectation that the purchaser would probably use them either militarily or politically against a member of NATO, CENTO, or SEATO. And with uneven results, the USSR has used the presence of its military power to convey assurances of backing to the leaders of national liberation or pro-Communist movements.

Soviet Management of Crises

10. Khrushchev's foreign policy has been aggressive; it has been a policy of pressing forward wherever weakness is sensed in the opponent's camp. The USSR has made substantial use of strategic threats in the past and we can expect the Soviet regime to be strongly inclined on occasion to make strategic threats in the future in order to promote its policies.* But as there are forces which tend to propel Soviet policy forward, there are also forces of restraint operative in Soviet strategic thought.

*In a public statement made in connection with the Berlin crisis in July 1961, Khrushchev succinctly expressed his philosophy of the political uses of strategic power in terms which can, of course, be applied to the USSR: "When an aggressor sees that no rebuff is given to him, he grows more brazen, and conversely, when he is given a rebuff he calms down. It is this historic experience that should guide us in our actions."

11. The residual Soviet fear of general war serves to regulate the peacetime exploitation of the country's military power, especially in the management of political or military crises. This built-in element of constraint is reflected in public expressions of concern over the possibility of global war being set off by a local conflagration or heightened international tensions. This constraint may operate independently of any expressed U.S. resolve to escalate a conflict. And it has been in evidence in a number of Soviet foreign policy initiatives, including the late Cuban crisis.

12. In recent years, the Soviets have been willing to take risks which in their view are not necessarily low but which (as conceived) are always controllable. They have also sought to reduce the extent to which the West is willing to take risks by increasing U.S. apprehension about the consequences of political crises or limited military action. But, as in the Cuban crisis, they have been motivated at times to act in a reassuring way in order to avert an unintended war. They have demonstrated a willingness to retreat to avoid a showdown and to cut losses in the midst of crises when Western resoluteness has been made plain. In short, their fear of escalation of a crisis into general war has imposed restraints on their use of military power to advance the Communist movement in peacetime, and almost certainly will continue to do so in the future.

13. The Soviets consider that the initiation of limited war with the Warsaw Pact forces would, as a rule, entail unnecessarily high risks and political liabilities. Soviet doctrine allows for the involvement of socialist countries in local war, but states that should the opposing nuclear powers become directly involved in it, the war would inevitably assume global, nuclear proportions. This postulate, in our view, underlies current Soviet strategic planning.

14. At least in Europe, the Soviets would wish to avoid extreme provocations or engagement in limited combat because their acts might induce a deliberate American decision to initiate general war or provoke an inadvertent war. If the West were to use armed force in some local situation or seemed about to introduce forces, the Soviets could be expected to threaten countermeasures but would not intervene with their own troops unless loss of their interest which was threatened was deemed important enough to warrant a high risk of involvement in a general war.

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15. The Soviet view of the extreme unlikelihood of local war in Europe, is importantly influenced by U.S. and NATO doctrine. The Soviets have made plain in public statements their awareness of the President's threat to initiate nuclear war under certain circumstances; and in available classified documents they have presented a fairly accurate though somewhat dated picture of NATO strategy. Classified sources have pointed out that NATO has no limited war doctrine, that it does not plan to fight any serious conventional war, that the conventional strength of NATO is inferior, and that all calculations of the NATO command are based on the use of nuclear weapons.

16. From all indications, Soviet leaders do not contemplate armed conflict between Soviet and Western forces in areas of contention at a distance from Soviet bloc territory. The recent Cuban episode was not an exception to the rule but additional evidence of it. The attempt to base in Cuba strategic offensive weapons under strict Soviet control was almost certainly made with the expectation that the U.S. would not act militarily against them when suddenly confronted with their presence. The Soviets plainly miscalculated on this account. When apprised of U.S. determination to remove the missile bases by force if necessary, the USSR backed down and acted to withdraw them. The Cuban gambit thus was not a departure from the strategic framework of avoidance of combat between Western and Soviet troops; at least as conceived, the risk, while high, was controllable by Moscow at each stage. The buildup of offensive systems in Cuba was not intended for local war, with or without nuclears, but as a great and much-needed increment to the Soviet strategic posture.

17. In point of fact, the Soviets do not have, nor give any sign of developing, the kind of forces that would enable them to carry out major military operations in Cuba or other distant areas. In other words, the USSR is not yet prepared --in its military strategy and capabilities--to protect its expanded influence at points at great distances from the Bloc. Thus only political means would be available to the USSR to cope with an internal "counter-revolution" of the 1956 Hungarian type in a country far from Soviet borders.

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18. If the USSR became directly involved in limited combat on the bloc periphery or in some remote place, they would almost certainly wish to minimize the chances of escalation to general war. Hence, we estimate that the USSR would not take the initiative in most circumstances to expand the scope of a conflict; it would not test the U.S. resolve to use nuclear weapons, for example, by taking advantage of a local preponderance of Soviet conventional forces to overrun important Western positions in Western Europe; it would not initiate the use of nuclear weapons in any conflict intended to be limited in scope. And unless there has been a basic change in Soviet strategic doctrine, the USSR would not try to match the U.S. in the event it introduced nuclear weapons in a local situation. In such a case, the USSR would either expand the scope of the conflict to a strategic scale or negotiate a settlement.

19. All in all, the Soviet attitude toward limited war will probably continue to be one of avoidance of direct involvement of Soviet forces. Their decision in any particular situation will, of course, be governed by their estimate of that situation, in its political as well as its military aspect. There is, of course, the continuing danger that the Soviets might underestimate the risks arising from some initiative. In particular instances of serious political involvement, such as in Berlin, they may from time to time increase pressures and thus raise the likelihood of miscalculation. But we believe that the Soviets will draw back in almost any situation--not involving a vital interest--in which they estimate that they are about to lose control of the risk of general war.

Strategic Reappraisal

20. The Soviets put much store by the world image of their military power vis-a-vis the West. They see military force as a symbol and instrument of their total power position. They expect the world to see in the growth of their military power proof of the success and invincibility of their social system. They expect that their ability to advance the cause of Communism worldwide will be enhanced with the increase of their military power. It appears to be a basic policy assumption--and a sound one--that a world

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belief in Soviet military superiority would be extremely helpful to the success of the Communist movement and the stability of deterrence. In this respect, a corollary assumption evidently is that a world image of Soviet military inferiority vis-a-vis the West, would be a serious liability.

21. What matters in regard to the power balance question in peacetime, of course, is not the actual military capabilities of a state, but what others think about the state's capabilities--or more accurately, what one state's beliefs are about another's. In 1960, the Soviets exaggerated their rocket capabilities against the U.S. because they were aware of actual Soviet inferiority in strategic forces, but were confident that their claims would be generally believed. When the Soviet deception was finally exposed, the credibility of Soviet strategic claims was put in question, as was the image which the Soviets had fostered of their military superiority.

22. Thus, in 1960-61, the USSR undertook a general reappraisal of its peacetime military posture and strategic situation. Soviet leaders became conscious of slippage both in respect to the power balance and the stability of Soviet strategic deterrence. They concluded, it seems, that their strategy--of building deterrence and pursuing foreign policy objectives on the basis of bluffing the West about Soviet long-range attack capabilities, while holding Europe hostage under the threat of mass annihilation by Soviet MRBMs--was no longer adequate.

23. The new strategic situation had the potential of being costly to the Soviets politically. Despite periodic efforts on the part of propagandists to restore the image of preponderant Soviet strength, Soviet leaders have felt obliged in cold war bargaining to exchange claims of an asymmetrical power arrangement for claims of a more symmetrical one. Since mid-1961, the Soviets in public statements have explicitly expressed a readiness to accept strategic parity as the basis from which political settlements should proceed.

24. Over roughly the same span of time, Soviet confidence in the stability of deterrence also tended to diminish. This is suggested by a combination of interrelated factors:

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(a) the renewal of charges in major policy statements in mid-1961 that the West is preparing to launch a war against the USSR (this coincided with new emphasis in professional military writings on the possible decisive effects of a surprise attack against the USSR); (b) the waning in 1961 of the strident confidence of the preceding year in an assured Soviet retaliatory capability; (c) the extreme sensitivity over U.S. claims to military superiority which have been made since September 1961.

25. In 1961, the Soviets took a number of measures intended to improve the general strategic situation (and the specific bargaining positions of the USSR in Berlin). Some of these measures were demonstrations or counter-demonstrations; others amounted to real increments in Soviet military power. To help obscure or compensate for their strategic deficiencies, the Soviets emphasized super-bombs, manned bombers, and nuclear submarines. They resumed nuclear testing, suspended the troop reduction program, deferred transfer of specialized categories of servicemen to the reserves, and announced increases in the overt military budget. They frustrated efforts from within the USSR (mainly Khrushchev's) to divert resources from heavy industry to consumer welfare.

26. In fall 1961, in a major policy speech at the 22nd CPSU Congress, the Defense Minister drew a picture of a large and versatile military establishment that was prepared to launch a pre-emptive attack against a would-be aggressor and to fight either a short or a protracted war in Eurasia if necessary. Malinovsky's speech also gave doctrinal underpinning to the policy measures bearing on the size and composition of the armed forces, thereby indicating that the changes were intended to have greater permanence than was suggested by previous Soviet public statements.

27. The decision to make public in thinly veiled language the doctrine of pre-emptive action was evidently taken with the aim of countering possible U.S. intentions to follow up its new claims to military superiority with a more aggressive foreign policy. The Soviets, in effect, sought to head off a bolder turn in U.S. foreign policy by intimating that the USSR has lowered the threshold for initiating war.

28. Also in 1961, the Soviets began to take new secret measures to correct actual deficiencies in the field of strategic rocket weapons. For one thing, they sought to improve their pre-emptive capability. This took the form of (1) stepping up the construction of sites for, and improving the readiness of, second and third generation ICBMs; (2) pressing forward with the development of ABMs. They also sought to improve their retaliatory capability by hardening new launch sites. Hardening would appear to be desirable in Soviet eyes on several accounts. It makes the need for pre-emptive actions less compelling; it tends to stabilize mutualdeterrence; and it makes for a more credible Soviet deterrent by giving greater assurance than presently exists of a Soviet capability to strike second.

29. Such measures take a long time to implement and are very costly. In view of the urgency which they attached to the problem of redressing the strategic imbalance, the Soviets attempted to take a short cut. Having estimated that their action would not provoke U.S. intervention, or that if the U.S. were about to intervene the USSR could withdraw without irretrievable political loss, the Soviet leaders took a chance this year on establishing MRBM and IRBM sites in Cuba. Had this gamble succeeded, their additional strategic strength would have significantly altered the general strategic situation.

30. Having failed to establish the forward bases in Cuba, the USSR will now have to rely on other methods to redress the imbalance. They may add substantially to existing strategic forces, or if that course seems fruitless, adopt a new strategy or work toward a realistic disarmament arrangement. We think that in any case the Soviets will not stand still on this matter. Their confidence in their deterrence of the U.S. and their estimate of the chances of attaining their foreign policy objectives turn on the balance of power question.

31. Despite their retreat in the recent Cuban venture, the Soviet leaders may try to acquire public recognition of Soviet military "superiority." Failing that, they will probably settle for a world image of parity with the U.S. To the extent that they can do so, they will try to parlay captivating space feats and qualitative advances in weapons as evidence of military prowess. But they will have to make

greater actual increments in strategic weapons than in the past, for purposes of bolstering their peacetime strategic position, owing to the decreased willingness of the world to accept Soviet claims at face value.



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