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11 August 1955

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE WEEKLY SUMMARY



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PART III

PATTERNS AND PERSPECTIVES

SOVIET DOCTRINE AND SURPRISE ATTACK

Recent writings of Soviet military leaders indicate that a re-examination of Soviet military doctrine has been in progress, with increased significance being attached to surprise atomic attack as a determining factor in war. There has been an undertone of threat in some of the recent public statements, including references to surprise atomic attack that seem to hint at the possibility of a Soviet preventive attack in the event of imminent danger of attack on the USSR. Mainly, however, the current discussion appears to reflect concern for defensive vigilance and a determination not to appear weak or intimidated.

The attention being given to the implications of surprise attacks represents a belated reappraisal of Stalin's strategic thinking in the light of a realistic assessment of nuclear-weapons capabilities. In Stalinist military theory, the importance of surprise and mobility, which led to the early German victories in 1941, was consistently belittled. These factors were always compared unfavorably with the "constantly operating factors" of national strength, which allegedly assured eventual victory for the massive ground forces of the USSR.

On 24 March 1955, Marshal Rotmistrov published an article in the Soviet army newspaper Red Star appealing, in the words of the title, "For a Creative Elaboration of Soviet Military Science." Since that time Soviet writers have almost unanimously called for frankly recognizing German successes resulting from achievement of surprise in 1941 and the general need to study objectively the military ideas of "the enemy."

Rotmistrov, a marshal of tank troops, was one of the few figures in the early postwar period to challenge orthodox Soviet military doctrine publicly by calling for the increased emphasis on mobile armored units which appears to have become accepted by the Soviet army in recent years.

A Re-examination of Doctrine

The first indication that Soviet military thinkers were revising their former views on the importance of surprise had come earlier, in September 1953, in an article in Military Thought, a journal distributed only to military officers. It plainly stated that the danger of surprise attack had increased under modern conditions of warfare.

Actual revision of the Soviet position on surprise as a factor affecting field combat was indicated by the same journal in February 1954 in an article called "Tactical Surprise and Ways of Effecting It," by Lt. Col. Zlatoverov, whose authority was probably enhanced by his position as coauthor of the official field service regulations of April 1953. Zlatoverov contended that the importance of surprise had been grossly underestimated in the USSR in the past and that "in present-day combat actions the importance of surprise and its role in the winning of victory has increased."

The importance of surprise on the level of national military strategy appears to have been publicly recognized for the first time in the spring of 1954, when serious concern was indicated over the possibility that sudden enemy employment of atomic and hydrogen weapons in event of war might have a decisive effect not hitherto appreciated in Soviet military thinking.

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Concern on this score probably lay beneath Malenkov's famous allusion on 12 March 1954 to the possibility of the "destruction of world civilization" by atomic war. This remark followed the successful US test of a hydrogen weapon on 1 March.

Subsequently, in his address to the Supreme Soviet on 26 April, Malenkov revised his statement to emphasize that, if "aggressive circles banking on the atomic weapons should resort to madness and should want to test the strength and might of the Soviet Union, there can be no doubt that the aggressor would be crushed by the same weapon." This threat of a crushing counterblow, which has been the official Soviet line ever since, is probably more a characteristic Soviet response to anxiety than a realistic appraisal of the military situation.

Atom Associated with "Surprise"

This bravado has continued down to the present. Molotov stated in his speech of 8 February that "not the USSR, but the USA" was now lagging behind in hydrogen weapons. Voroshilov and other political leaders joined in re-emphasizing Soviet refusal to be "intimidated" by the threat of atomic war. In May 1954, Marshal Vasilevsky called for a greatly heightened campaign of defensive vigilance "so that nothing unexpected can catch us unawares." Bulganin, then minister of defense, declared in July that "until the United States renounces the use of atomic and hydrogen weapons, the Soviet Union is forced to possess these weapons so as not to be left without weapons in case of a surprise."

After Malenkov's demotion in early February 1955, Soviet leaders began to intimate publicly that the decisiveness

of atomic surprise might be a general principle of modern war. At this point came the first hints that the threat of atomic war might require a response other than instant and crushing retaliation. Marshal Sokolovsky, deputy defense minister and chief of the Defense Ministry general staff, wrote in Izvestia on 23 February: "The mere preparation and ability on the part of states subjected to the threat of attack to answer blow for blow is not enough. One must deprive the aggressor of the element of surprise and not allow oneself to be caught unawares."

The importance of atomic surprise was most explicitly acknowledged in Rotmistrov's Red Star article of 24 March, which included the blunt declaration that "in certain circumstances a surprise assault using atomic and hydrogen weapons may be one of the decisive conditions of success not only in the initial period of a war, but in its entire course." In subsequent months, public discussion of the significance of surprise attack in modern warfare has been a principal element in the "creative elaboration of Soviet military science" called for by Rotmistrov.

"Surprise" in Soviet Policy

The recent discussion of surprise attack on the national strategic level has plainly been stimulated by growing Soviet realization of the destructive potential of nuclear weapons. There have been several different methods of dealing with this potential in public statements.

On the one hand, some Soviet military figures paint a picture of general destruction which seems to approach Malenkov's officially discredited reference to the "destruction of world civilization." Marshal Vasilevsky came closest to this position on 4 December

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1954 in an open letter in Pravda to Field Marshal Montgomery, in which he spoke of the responsibility that "we military men" bear for "hundreds of millions of lives which can perish during a future war" and for "the destruction of the largest centers of culture and industry which might be wiped off the face of the earth."

Marshal Zhukov also has often alluded to the "heavy losses for both sides" that would result from atomic war. He referred on 20 April to the destruction that might ensue for "children, mothers, and wives" in "New York or Moscow, London or Paris." On the anniversary of V-E Day this year, amid the generally bellicose assertions of Soviet invincibility, Zhukov again conjured up the picture of mutual destruction that would result "if, in the course of a war, thousands of atomic and hundreds of hydrogen bombs were to be used by each side."

In contrast to this relatively realistic appreciation, Marshal Konev, chief of the joint Soviet-Satellite command, and Lt. Gen. Shatilov, deputy head of the Chief Political Directorate of the Defense Ministry, have in recent pronouncements avoided indicating the mutually destructive power of nuclear weapons. Marshal Bagramyan, an eminent World War II commander who has recently been accorded increasing prominence, has stressed Soviet invincibility, repeating verbatim Molotov's claim of 8 February 1955 of Soviet superiority over America in hydrogen weapons.

There has not yet, therefore, even in military circles, been a clear resolution of the question of whether or not atomic war implies mutual destruction. But the tacit acceptance in higher levels of the regime of a relatively realistic appreciation may be assumed from

the fact that neither Bulganin and Khrushchev nor any spokesmen for the Ministry of Defense are yet known to have publicly echoed the Molotov-Voroshilov formula that only "rotten capitalism" would be destroyed in a nuclear war.

In the late spring of 1955 Soviet domestic radio broadcasts made many references to the dangers of surprise attack, but invariably in the context of exhorting the Soviet people to defensive vigilance and awareness of the strengths of a potential enemy. At the same time a crescendo of praise for Soviet strength and invincibility was noticeable in international Soviet propaganda throughout May, and added emphasis was given by the ostentatious demonstration of increased long-range bomber and jet fighter capabilities in aerial fly-bys from late April to the annual Aviation Day show on 3 July.

Recent Expressions of Doctrine

This show of strength was almost certainly designed primarily to convince the West that the USSR was not approaching a period of international negotiations "on broken legs," as Khrushchev put it. But two articles, published in May, did seem to go further in that they contained veiled threats that surprise atomic attack might be a possible expedient of Soviet policy if worst came to worst.

On 13 May, Marshal Bagramyan published an article in the literary journal October, extending the general objectives of surprise attack to include attack on distant political centers: "At the contemporary stage of the development of military affairs and technique," he wrote, "the role of surprise has grown still more, since an unexpected blow may be launched not only at troops deployed on the front, but also at strategic

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objectives, important political and industrial centers lying far from the front lines." Bagramyan issued a call to vigilance, referring to "the holy duty of the Soviet armed forces to nip in the bud every striving of the aggressors to carry out a surprise attack on our Soviet motherland."

Even more menacing in tone was a warning injected by General Shatilov into an article in the Literary Gazette of 28 May: "Knowing the savage nature of the aggressors, we cannot fail to examine the plans which they are preparing.... Those who think they will find us passive or unprepared to repel the aggressor will be deeply disappointed. It would pay the all-too-belligerous admirals and generals of the imperialist camp to remember well that atomic weapons as well as suddenness of action are double-edged weapons, and it is hardly sensible to jest with them."

In view of the recent Soviet emphasis on avoiding "stereotyped rehashes" of old military doctrine and the increased production and delivery capabilities of the USSR in the nuclear field, it is probable that anticipatory, preventive or spoiling attack has been considered by Soviet military theorists, and it may have been advocated as a practical course of action in the private deliberations of Soviet leaders. Public discussion of surprise attack may in part reflect a desire of Soviet leaders for public awareness in the USSR that strategic surprise--in the sense of an anticipatory counter-punch--might at some time of strategic extremity be a

necessary expedient of Soviet policy.

On the other hand, recent public discussion of surprise attack appears to have been related primarily to (1) a domestic campaign for greater understanding of and vigilance against a serious enemy capability and (2) an international campaign not to appear intimidated by the Western "policy of strength."

The context and the public nature of these statements give little ground for assuming that any conscious campaign of preparation for preventive war is currently intended by the Soviet leadership.

Soviet resort to a preventive surprise attack would imply neglect of the "historical forces" and "constantly operating factors" in favor of some of the ideas of "adventurism" and risk which trained Communists have traditionally rejected as characteristic of Western policy and symptomatic of weakness.

It is unlikely, moreover, that Soviet leaders would risk their power position and expose the USSR to nuclear devastation unless they were almost certain that they could gain their objective of crushing American military strength in one blow or unless they believed that an attack on the USSR was imminent. At present there are numerous indications that Soviet leaders neither underestimate American strength in this field nor believe attack on the USSR imminent.

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