LY/INFO ✓

SURVIVAL

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1977

The International Institute for Strategic Studies

The US–Soviet Strategic Balance as seen from London and Paris

HERBERT GOLDHAMER

Perceptions of the military forces and capabilities of other nations do not necessarily correspond with the actual status of these forces. As history demonstrates, secrecy, deception and self-deception frequently combine to produce disparities between reality and belief. These disparities often have important political and military consequences, affecting as they do opportunities for deterrence and intimidation, the probability of war and success or failure if war occurs. Napoleon was especially sensitive to this: 'In a war all is mental, and opinion makes up more than half of reality'. 'The reputation of one's arms in war is everything and equivalent to real forces'. Clearly, then, political and military leaders have strong incentives to shape the perceptions of potential or actual antagonists, allies and third parties. Nazi Germany's success in the pre-war period in persuading many sectors of English and French opinion that her strategic air capability would enable her to destroy the cities, populations and industries of France and Britain is one important case; one, however, that reveals that tendencies to self-deception help make manipulation and deception more feasible. The Soviet Union's success not only in masking her strategic inferiority to the United States in the mid-1950s and through much of the 1960s but in convincing the world, including many sectors of American opinion, that she was strategically superior is another instance of highly successful deception. Of course beliefs may also be manipulated to ensure that others' perceptions accord with reality when that reality is favourable to oneself, and they can be used for purposes of deterrence or intimidation.

The evident importance of how potential antagonists, allies, neutrals and one's own people view the balance of military power has recently led to a series of studies of the US–Soviet strategic balance as perceived by various groups and opinion sources. This article summarizes the results of two such studies: the images of the US–Soviet strategic balance as presented in the London weekly *The Economist* and the Paris daily *Le Monde* from 1948–73.[1]

Study of these two journals was motivated by several considerations. First, the United States has an interest in the opinions and morale of her European allies, and the effect on them of their information and judgments on the US–Soviet strategic balance. Second, *The Economist* and *Le Monde* are read by political, economic and administrative élites, not only in their own countries but throughout Europe and, indeed, the world. Third, these journals are of interest not only for their influence on others but as an expression of opinion and information by a relatively sophisticated set of journalists whose perceptions of the balance have an interest independent of their influence. Fourth, these journals provide relatively stable sources that avoid dependence on remembered past opinions; they represent an adequate degree of consistency of audience, style and substantive coverage over the quarter-century studied.[2] Finally, it seemed reasonable to suppose that a careful reading of their reporting and editorial writing on the US–Soviet balance would provide some insights into how perceptions of the strategic balance are shaped.[3]

Herbert Goldhamer was formerly a staff member of the Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California. He died on 8 August 1977.

[1] These studies were undertaken by The Rand Corporation, supported by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

[2] Both *The Economist* and *Le Monde* showed some changes in political orientation during the period studied, but these changes do not seem to have had a substantial effect on their coverage and perceptions of the US–Soviet strategic balance.

[3] The Centre de Documentation of *Le Monde* in Paris, whose cuttings of news and editorial content are classified under helpful headings, made it possible to photostat expeditiously the relevant portions of twenty-six years of *Le Monde*. I am deeply indebted to the courtesies provided by M. Michel Tatu and the personnel of the documentation centre. Examining twenty-six years of the weekly *The Economist* was, of course, much less of a problem.

As a weekly journal of opinion with unsigned cles and not much detailed attribution of rces, *The Economist* tended to present at any one time a relatively uniform picture of the US–Soviet strategic balance. *Le Monde*'s treatment was marked by an exceptionally broad range of sources, official and unofficial, usually with very full attributions. Consequently, *Le Monde* provided a set of images of the balance rather than a single view at a given moment. Editorial comment (often appended to news articles) and specialized articles provided a substantial amount of guidance in the interpretation of conflicting views and thus gave a *Le Monde* cast – not in any case unvariable – to press agency materials on US and Soviet military affairs. *Le Monde*, with the greater space available to a daily and its penchant for not writing down to its readers, provided numerous technical articles on modern weaponry that were indispensable for a proper understanding of American and Soviet postures and capabilities. How many readers studied these articles is a matter of conjecture, but their continued publication over the quarter-century covered suggests that the *Le Monde* editors believed that they gave a real service to their readers. These technical articles, together with articles provided by *Le Monde*'s correspondents editorial writers, complemented press agency s reports on what military and technical journals, military annuals (*The Military Balance*, *Jane's*, etc.), foreign news magazines and newspapers were saying.

What is the Strategic Balance?

From the investigator's standpoint the US–Soviet strategic balance refers to capabilities for nuclear inter-continental war. These include number and size of weapons, their carriers, accuracy, reliability and other qualitative features, warning and defence capabilities including civil defence, command and control, and the probable dynamic interaction of all these in the course of an actual conflict. It is possible to find statements on most of these matters in *The Economist* and especially in *Le Monde* and these taken together may be said to constitute their conceptions of the strategic balance (and possibly of their readers). But for any particular correspondent, news agency writer or editorialist, the strategic balance was sometimes a much vaguer object. The exigencies of exposition could tempt them (and indeed the investigator) to ascribe a greater exactness and sharpness of contour to a perception than it deserved. What is often required in these matters is an exact description of confusion or vagueness. Nonetheless, the following pages probably represent fairly enough what *The Economist* and *Le Monde* had to say on the strategic balance.

Both *The Economist* and *Le Monde* gave considerable prominence to quantitative characterizations of the strategic balance: the number of inter-continental missiles, warheads, bombers, etc. This prominence was very much a consequence of the considerable publicity given to *The Military Balance*, *Jane's* and US official and unofficial statements on these matters, and later to the Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT) negotiations. Numerical comparisons are the easiest to express and probably to absorb. *Le Monde*, however, was conscientious in giving substantial attention to qualitative differences in material and to aspects of the balance not so readily reducible to a few numbers. With the greater space available to a daily, and lengthy articles as well as brief news reports with their appended editorial comment, *Le Monde* was able to provide for its readers a much fuller and more accurate image of the balance than could a weekly journal of opinion like *The Economist*.

In both *The Economist* and *Le Monde* a rather different conception of the strategic balance could occasionally be detected: at times an assured destruction capability by each side signified an equivalence of strategic military power irrespective of the 'numbers game'. This view, however, was not consistently held. The balance was also sometimes conceived as including elements such as national will, technical and economic resources.

Who is Winning?

During the twenty-six-year period covered by these two studies, both *The Economist* and *Le Monde* overestimated Soviet capabilities at various times. In the case of both journals this was least noticeable in the field of nuclear weapons and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), was quite pronounced in the heavy-bomber field (especially in *Le Monde* in the early 1950s), and most apparent in both journals in the inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) field during the period 1957–61. There was only one

important case where American capability was grossly exaggerated (see below). Most of the attributions of excessive capabilities to the Soviet Union corresponded on the whole to beliefs widely current in the United States and often responsible for European misperceptions. At a time when United States strategic superiority was greatest, many sections of Western opinion thought the Soviet Union was the stronger, and it was precisely when the Soviet Union began to overtake the United States in numbers of intercontinental ballistic missiles that Western opinion (as a result of the success of the space programme) began to ascribe greater strategic strength to the United States.

There were some differences between the two journals worth noting:

(1) While both accorded an advantage to the United States in bombs and warheads, in 1965 *Le Monde* began to point out a Soviet advantage in megatonnage;

(2) In the heavy-bomber field *Le Monde* found little to say in 1948 and 1949, and in 1952–3 attributed heavy-bomber capabilities to the Soviet Union equal to those of the United States. *The Economist*, in the meantime, gave the United States a vast lead in this department during these years;

(3) *Le Monde* was much more impressed by US weapons technology and was not so prone to be carried away by Soviet 'super' bombs and 'global' bombs. On the other hand the journal was over-impressed by the quality of Soviet bombers in the early 1960s and thought they had a degree of excellence unequalled in the United States;

(4) Although initially very much impressed by Soviet accomplishments in the missile and space field, *Le Monde* became more cautious as its conviction grew that the Soviet advantage was largely sustained by the size of its launchers;

(5) *Le Monde* was sufficiently impressed by US accomplishments in nuclear submarines, SLBM, and multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV), to give the United States an edge in the strategic balance, even after it had reported that the Soviet Union had surpassed the United States in numbers of ICBM.

It is likely that for many readers of *Le Monde* and *The Economist*, and certainly for some of the writers represented in these journals, military capabilities as discussed above were less interesting or relevant than notions concerning what each nation could do to the other. As we noted earlier, views on who had, for example, more ICBM were sometimes associated with the belief that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States would dare to engage in a first strike. Thus a belief concerning deterrence (or non-deterrence) could be associated with a very wide range of capabilities imputed to the two super-powers.

The Process of Perception

More interesting, perhaps, than the views of *The Economist* and *Le Monde* on who was ahead in strategic capabilities – views, after all, not so very distinctive – are some of the underlying characteristics of the perception process.

(1) *The Economist* had a marked tendency to report any event concerning a new weapon development as being immediately and of itself affecting the current strategic balance although it would generally not be operational for several years. When the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik* and her first ICBM test vehicles, *The Economist* spoke of 'a majestic Soviet superiority'. It was not until 1962 that it got around to saying that ICBM were, after all, rare on both sides and, in effect, the strategic balance still depended largely on manned bombers. Similarly, when President Johnson announced in 1964 the development of the US Air Force's A-11, this declaration was referred to by *The Economist* as 'altering sharply' the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. *Le Monde* did not tend to make such rash statements, although it seems clear from other evidence that people generally, and therefore probably its readers, often assumed changes in the balance when new, not yet operational, developments were reported.

(2) Rates of change in a strategic dimension sometimes dominated accounts of the current status so that the perception of a change in the balance sometimes led to an assumption of current superiority for the side with the greater growth rate. Since the Soviet Union started off behind the United States in the nuclear and bomber field, emphasis on rates of change tended to make her look better than an emphasis on the current status would have done.

(3) Capabilities and deficiencies in non-strategic areas affect judgments of the strategic

alance. Thus, in 1974 *The Economist* judged that US inflation had negatively affected the American position in the balance of power. Much earlier, in 1948, Professor Blackett had been quoted to the effect that Soviet ground superiority offset US bomb superiority. In the same year *The Economist* had quoted Secretary Marshall to the effect that the US military establishment was 'a hollow shell'. These statements from both sides of the Atlantic are not quite relevant to our definition of the strategic balance as nuclear inter-continental warfare, but that hardly precluded others from having their perceptions of the balance altered by them, despite *The Economist*'s statement, also in 1948, that the United States had a 'formidable lead' in nuclear weapons. An imputation of military capabilities from non-military achievements is made explicit in a statement by *Le Monde*'s André Fontaine, referring to *Apollo* 8: 'Now it is *self-evident* that the military machine of a country capable of such an exploit has every likelihood of being at the same level' (29–30 December 1968, emphasis added).

As Fontaine's statement might lead one to suspect, the space race was a very important case of non-military development shaping perceptions of the strategic balance. In the earliest years the two were not independent since the space race provided the principal input for discussions of ICBM developments. However, even in later years, both *The Economist* and *Le Monde* attached a great deal of importance to events in space. *The Economist* had predicted that the Soviet Union would reach the moon a good many years before the United States, and perhaps it was the heavy burden of this prediction that led to their rather petulant remarks in later years, both about Soviet failures and US *Apollo* successes.

(4) The more or less factual materials presented by *The Economist* and *Le Monde* on strategic weapon developments were complemented by substantial amounts of other material that had a propagandistic character (not always evident). These materials were generally newsworthy and not likely to be neglected by press agencies. They seem to have had substantial effect on public opinion throughout the world and on the press agencies, correspondents and editorial writers of *The Economist* and *Le Monde* and, of course, of the media in general.

The propaganda battle was waged in three forms: (1) by the development or exploitation of weapons in a manner not entirely dictated by technical requirements, that is, dictated by political objectives; (2) by demonstrations of weapons to key persons (aiming to influence military, media and public opinion); (3) by statements, speeches, reports, etc., that stretch the truth for political effect. (Of course on many occasions the truth was also a powerful moulder of perceptions of the balance.)

The first form was a Soviet speciality. The Soviet 60-megaton bomb may have been partly dictated by Soviet technical backwardness in the early years, but it is likely that it was partly motivated by political considerations. Certainly its exploitation was highly political. Soviet large-megaton bombs and the Soviet orbital (global) bombs were interpreted by *Le Monde* as having little or no military significance and as politically motivated. The Soviet choice of dates for some of its space launches were politically and not technically determined.[4] Of course, the entire *Apollo* programme can equally be viewed as an immense propaganda undertaking, but technical considerations predominated in its execution. In any event, both Soviet weapons propaganda and the American *Apollo* programme had enormous consequences for world perceptions of the US–Soviet strategic balance. Sub-polar tours by American nuclear submarines were also intended to impress the world and probably had political as well as technical motives. The ability of United States war vessels to approach so closely to the northern borders of the Soviet Union was viewed by *Le Monde* as an American strategic triumph. In the early years of the cold war US Air Force transatlantic flights of F-80, B-29 and B-36 aircraft, though partly resulting from the lack of permanent overseas bases, were no doubt intended – in addition to training and testing functions – to convince allies and the Soviet Union of American capabilities.

Less important perhaps, but instructive nevertheless, was visual perception of weapon demonstrations and air shows. An article by an *Economist* correspondent who witnessed a *Nike-Hercules* ground-to-air missile 'kill' a small drone target clearly showed that visual demonstration carried far more conviction than was likely to come from a public-relations release or the statement of a high official. The reaction of two report-

[4] Leonid Vladimirov, *The Russian Space Bluff* (New York: Dial Press, 1973) provides considerable evidence of this.

ers from *The Times* (London), who visited the first US nuclear submarine while it was under construction, also conveys the visit's emotional impact on them. *Le Monde*'s reports on the Strategic Air Command (SAC), based on correspondents' visits, are charged with a sense of deep respect and were far more effective than anything else *Le Monde* published on United States military organizations. As one *Le Monde* correspondent wrote, 'Nothing replaces a certain visual experience . . .' (21–22 July 1963). The Soviet Union provided a somewhat less intimate form of visual impact in her Paris and Moscow May Day fly-pasts and air shows. These various efforts to impress media representatives as well as military and diplomatic personnel paid off in prominent stories in the media.

The third mode of shaping perceptions may be appropriately termed the battle of statements by political and military leaders of the two powers. Here the Soviet Union had a substantial advantage. The exigencies of the United States budgetary process and the multiple American voices – representing a broad spectrum of political and military views – often meant that conflicting statements and highly negative remarks concerning US military power reported by *The Economist* and *Le Monde* came from United States spokesmen. The Soviet Union did not engage in self-derogation to say the least, though with one very important exception. In 1956 Marshal Zhukov told Hansen Baldwin of the *New York Times* that the United States overestimated Soviet strategic air strength. This statement, so out of character for a Soviet spokesman, coincided with the visit of General Twining, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, to Moscow, and it seems likely, given the unimpressive show that the Soviet Union put before Twining and his party, that their behaviour was intended to get the United States to lower her estimate of Soviet strategic air capabilities and thereby to decrease the production of the B-52 (recently augmented due to the threat of Soviet aviation growth). B-52 production was in fact cut back after the Zhukov statement and the Twining visit.

In addition to a solid propaganda front claiming great military achievements, during a set of crucial years the Soviet Union had the advantage of a spokesman who could make headlines – Khrushchev ('My secret weapon is my tongue'). Marshal Malinovsky was also a frequent spokesman who received substantial attention. Their statements were replete with hyperbole. Soviet bombs, rockets, submarines, etc., were almost always 'super' and 'gigantic', and *Le Monde* sometimes took over this language. When an outright denial of an American claim was difficult to make, it could nonetheless in effect be achieved by a Soviet answer that side-stepped the main point, but not too obviously. Thus, an American statement claiming US superiority in SLBM might lead to an immediate Soviet 'rebuttal' that, quite to the contrary, it was the Soviet Union that had far more submarines than the United States – a statement which, if reported, headlined or read carelessly, gave readers the impression that the Soviet Union was saying that she had more SLBM.

American official spokesmen were not always of a rank to get the same amount of attention as Khrushchev and Malinovsky, although the attention accorded President Eisenhower's farewell speech on leaving office and President Johnson's announcement of the A-11 should have made the White House more aware of the importance of the President as a spokesman. When Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric made his important statement on 21 October 1961, concerning the nonexistence of a US missile lag, neither *Le Monde* nor *The Economist* paid very much attention to it. However, Secretary McNamara's strong statements concerning United States superiority (he was in a favourable position to make them) elicited defensive, almost frantic and hysterical, denials by the Soviet Union that must have made a poor impression on perceptive readers of *Le Monde*. On the other hand, Secretary Laird (admittedly in a less favourable position) was so fond of bewailing the US military position that *Le Monde* rebuked him. One should add that Soviet affirmations of great military accomplishments did not always achieve their intended effect. *Le Monde* frequently adopted a sceptical tone in reporting Soviet claims.

(5) Perceptions of the strategic balance were also substantially affected by the political and military actions of the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, of the United States. Anything from rhetoric in the UN to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 influenced views on the strategic balance. Aggressive, seemingly confident behaviour of a country's leaders tended to be interpreted as a sign of military strength. Defen-

sive, hesitant, self-depreciating behaviour gave an impression of military weakness. The early [redacted] of the cold war and of the early missile and [redacted] races were periods when Soviet aggressive behaviour and Western expressions verging on panic, reported at length in both *Le Monde* and *The Economist*, influenced judgments on where military strength lay. How easily a political leader can influence the views of apparently sophisticated political and media personalities was illustrated in late September and early October 1960, when Khrushchev's insulting behaviour in the UN Assembly led to an 'urgent' meeting in Washington of Eisenhower, Macmillan, Menzies and their advisers. The language used by *The Times* in discussing this meeting is revealing: 'Altogether this brief but intensive Washington interlude has reflected the concern – indeed, the *alarm*, felt over Mr Khrushchev's *mysterious* behaviour . . .' (3 October 1960, emphasis added).

On the United States' side, it seems that MacArthur's Inchon landing did as much to fortify *The Economist*'s confidence in American strategic power as any information on US atomic weapons and delivery capabilities. On the other hand, *Le Monde* tended to treat American responses in Korea, Cuba and Vietnam not so much as evidence of US military power as of US [redacted]ical will.

Military Threat or Political Advantage

We have already seen that substantial distortions of the strategic balance (including at times a complete reversal of the actual situation) could be found in *The Economist* and *Le Monde*, as well as in the views current in the United States and most parts of the world resulting from the processes discussed above and, of course, from secrecy maintained on military matters, particularly by the Soviet Union.

There are three points of further interest that should be noted concerning the impact of these perceptions.

(1) When the Soviet Union was judged to be achieving great strategic power *The Economist* viewed this development with alarm as signifying a substantial increase in *military* threat. *Le Monde*, on the other hand, tended to view such circumstances as increasing *political* advantages for the Soviet Union, especially in the Third World, rather than military opportunities. This difference was probably associated with a tendency for *The Economist* to identify the United Kingdom with the United States as a single Anglo-Saxon entity, subject to the same military threat; and for *Le Monde* to take a more distanced view of US–Soviet rivalry, as it had a less direct relation to French national security.

(2) A similar difference appears in the treatment of the space race by the journals, *The Economist* being more prone to see military significance and *Le Monde* political and prestige consequences – again especially in the Third World. *Le Monde*'s emphasis on political consequences in the Third World had a curious feature – evidence on this matter was difficult to find in its columns, and in reading these statements one is led to feel that *Le Monde* preferred to ascribe to the Third World an impressionability that was by no means absent in France, as French public opinion polls showed. Certainly Latin Americans were greatly influenced by *Sputnik*, but during the later years of the space race and Soviet ICBM numerical superiority Latin American commentators often tended to see their own military and technical capabilities as so inferior to the two great super-powers that any distinction between the latter was hardly perceptible or worth mentioning. They were simply both 'of the first rank'.[5]

(3) Finally, one should note that the many factors affecting judgments of the strategic balance, especially the succession of sensational political, military, weapon-development and space events during the 1950s and 1960s made opinions highly changeable and induced a degree of instability in judgments of the balance that is one of the more notable features of the period.

[5] The ease with which perceptions of self are also influenced by images of the super-powers is well illustrated in a statement by an important Latin American commentator, Mariano C. Grondona. Impressed by the physical size of the United States, Grondona finds that the European nations 'are small *like our own*' (emphasis added). He thus seems to ignore that his native Argentina is larger than West Germany, Great Britain, France, Italy, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Norway and Sweden taken together, and that even Bolivia is larger than West Germany, Italy, Belgium and Holland combined. 'América Latina como región', *Visión*, 25 September 1970, p. 63.