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"DETERRENCE" AND SURPRISE ATTACK IN
SOVIET STRATEGIC THOUGHT

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SUMMARY

The explosion of the first Soviet thermonuclear device in August 1953 brought the USSR to the threshold of "nuclear parity" with the United States and presented Stalin's successors with a new set of military and political alternatives from which to choose in charting their country's course. Premier Malenkov's March 1954 statement, unprecedented for a Soviet leader, that a new world war would mean the "destruction of world civilization" was regarded in some Western circles as an indication that the USSR might at last be prepared to accept the political consequences of peace enforced by mutual deterrence. But inside the Soviet Union the implications of Malenkov's statement became the subject of intensive intra-Party debate. The dispute centered on the question of the reliability of deterrence: Did the advent of hydrogen bombs mean that fear of destroying world civilization would curb imperialist aggressiveness? Was the USSR's nuclear capability sufficiently powerful to deter Western attack? Might not the enhanced potentialities of surprise attack with nuclear weapons cancel out the deterrent effect of the possession of these weapons by both sides? The victorious Party faction, headed by Khrushchev, condemned Malenkov's statement as heretical, deposed him in February 1955, and proceeded to intensify the Soviet military build-up.

In the new strategic context created by the rapid growth of Soviet military capabilities in recent years, and particularly by the USSR's acquisition of long-range missiles, the central question for the Soviet leadership has become not so much the reliability of deterrence, which remains the West's major preoccupation, as the adequacy of a deterrent posture to satisfy the broad requirements of Soviet policy. Khrushchev's current expressions of confidence in the ability of the USSR to deter a premeditated Western attack on the Soviet Union go far beyond what Malenkov seemed to imply in 1954; but Khrushchev's confidence is based not on a rough equivalence of power, as Malenkov's apparently was, but on an explicit assertion of strategic superiority. However, while deterrence is doubtless an element in Soviet strategy, **it is not the whole of that strategy.** The Soviet leaders would probably regard deterrence per se as an unworthy object for their global strategy to pursue, and mutual deterrence as an inadequate outcome for their great military and political exertions. At best they can regard a deterrent posture as necessary to reduce to tolerable levels **the risks associated with their political aggrandizement in a world of nuclear weapons.** A prolonged state of mutual deterrence can be acceptable to the USSR only if its political effects are less than perfectly symmetrical: a usable residue of intimidation must remain.

It is perhaps for this reason that theories of mutual annihilation are repugnant to Soviet leaders. They evidently believe that a mutual preoccupation with survival, which such theories imply, can lead only to political paralysis; and while paralysis of the enemy is most desirable, it must not be bought at the cost of paralyzing themselves. Nuclear war, Khrushchev asserts, would be a terrible ordeal for all concerned, but while the Western powers would be "wiped from the face of the earth," the USSR would survive, and communism would triumph throughout the world. Khrushchev insists on distinguishing between the "great losses" which a Western nuclear strike could inflict on the USSR, and the "incomparably" greater losses which the West would suffer. The anticipated Soviet losses may be more than the Soviet leaders would willingly bear, and their acknowledgement that these losses might be great tends to reassure the West that they would not lightly plunge the world into nuclear war. But the gap between the Soviet and Western losses they predict may be intended to imply that the range of extreme circumstances which might compel a resort to war is greater for the USSR than for the West. Finally, while Khrushchev has asserted that Soviet missile superiority and missile deployment measures make a Western surprise attack infeasible, thus precluding the last chance for the West to secure a tolerable military outcome, he has not precluded the success of such a strategy for the USSR.

PREFATORY NOTE

The present Research Memorandum represents an unclassified condensation and revision of the author's RM-2496, "Surprise Attack in Soviet Military Thought Since the 1955 Doctrinal Revision," Confidential. This original Research Memorandum analyzed some of the changes in Soviet strategic thought from 1955 to 1959. RM-2618 includes a broader treatment of the surprise attack question in the context of deterrence and devotes considerable attention to the Khrushchev speech of January 14, 1960, which was not available when RM-2496 was written.

The present Research Memorandum, in its original form, was prepared, upon request, as an article for the 1960 Annual of the Royal Canadian Air Force Staff College Journal. In accordance with RAND's normal practice, it was distributed by the author, as RAND Corporation Paper P-2016, to a number of interested agencies. It is being made available for wider distribution in its present Project RAND Research Memorandum form because of the importance of the subject and the additional material treated.

**"DETERRENCE" AND SURPRISE ATTACK IN
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The advent of modern strategic weapon systems, with their highly concentrated destructive power and drastically compressed delivery time, has made the stability of deterrence, as between the two superpowers, critically dependent upon the maintenance of a mutually shared conviction that surprise attack is an infeasible or prohibitively risky strategy for either one to employ against the other. Despite serious differences of opinion on the difficulties involved in maintaining an assured second-strike capability, the specific measures required, and the costs associated with them, responsible Western political and military leaders now seem generally to agree that ensuring the survival of nuclear retaliatory forces against surprise attack is the central problem of deterrence in the nuclear-missile age. Though its implications may not yet be perfectly understood, the proposition itself marks an important advance from the not too distant days when deterrent power was comfortably measured according to the formula: one bomb in the pre-war stockpile equals one retaliatory bomb delivered on target.

*I am indebted to my colleague, Myron Rush, who read the manuscript and made many valuable comments and criticisms.

As our concept of deterrence becomes more sophisticated and the problems associated with it more complex, we are led to ponder how our opponents may view the questions which agitate us and how closely their beliefs may correspond to the assumptions we make about them in framing Western deterrent strategy. The assumptions we make about the beliefs of the Soviet leaders are not susceptible to conclusive proof, but they should be based on something more substantial than the mere projection of our own convictions. If they are to be reasonable assumptions, they must take into account whatever relevant evidence we can bring to bear.

This paper seeks to illuminate some aspects of the Soviet leaders' beliefs about deterrence and the related question of strategic surprise, in so far as these beliefs are revealed in their public statements. Such source materials have obvious limitations, but they can yield important insights, provided that care is taken in their interpretation. In examining the statements of Soviet leaders, it is necessary to analyze their rhetorical objectives, and to keep in mind that these pronouncements are designed as much to influence external opponents and disarm internal rivals as to disclose beliefs. If we can ascertain these objectives, we can relate them to the underlying beliefs and values which they are calculated to serve.

I

It has become fashionable in recent years not only to attribute to the Russians theories of deterrence that are distinctively Western in origin, but even to impute to them the Western jargon of deterrence. For example, one American authority on Soviet military affairs writes of ICBM's as comprising part of the "Soviet strategic deterrence forces."¹ But the jargon and the theories are ours, not theirs. There is no Soviet counterpart to the highly articulated, self-conscious Western doctrines of deterrence.

More than six years ago, a Soviet leader set forth what might have become the foundation for a Soviet theory of deterrence. On March 12, 1954, several months after President Eisenhower, in his "Atoms for Peace" speech before the U.N., foresaw the "probability of civilization destroyed" as the consequence of nuclear war, Soviet Premier Georgii Malenkov told the Soviet people that a new world war fought with present means of warfare "means the destruction of world civilization."² Malenkov thus became the first Soviet spokesman to repudiate the Stalinist prediction that a new world war would lead only

¹R. Garthoff, Soviet Strategy in the Nuclear Age (Praeger, New York, 1958), p. 245.

²Pravda, March 13, 1954.

to the collapse of capitalism. It is important to note, however, that this first Soviet enunciation of the "destruction-of-world-civilization" thesis was also the last; its lone exponent was soon compelled to recant his heresy and was later replaced as head of the Soviet Government.

Malenkov's unprecedented statement was welcomed in some Western circles as an indication that the USSR might at last be prepared to accept the political consequences of peace enforced by mutual deterrence. In the West, belief in mutual deterrence, or what has been called the balance of terror, is widely based on the expectation that thermonuclear war must result in mutual destruction on a mutually unacceptable scale. Expressions like "mutual annihilation" or "destruction of world civilization" are commonly employed to convey the expected outcome of such a war. These expressions are not necessarily meant to be taken literally, but they are understood to signify that distinctions between possible outcomes are meaningless, since no outcome could conceivably be bearable or acceptable to either side, under any circumstances. It therefore appeared as if Malenkov were ruling out a military resolution of the East-West conflict as no longer feasible for either side.

In the Soviet Union, the implications of Malenkov's statement became the subject of a stormy intra-Party dispute.

Malenkov had apparently come to the conclusion that the USSR's acquisition of nuclear weapons, and particularly its successful testing of a hydrogen device in August 1953, deterred the West from employing its nuclear weapons against the USSR and therefore reduced the likelihood of a new world war. This view was supported by several other Soviet leaders, who did not, however, go so far as to predict the destruction of world civilization as the consequence of a new war. Speaking in Yerevan at about the same time Malenkov spoke in Moscow, Mikoyan was explicit in noting the deterrent effect of Soviet nuclear weapons:

The danger of war has receded to a large extent in connection with the fact that we now have not only the atomic but also the hydrogen bomb.³

It was apparently on the basis of this estimate that

Malenkov proposed a leveling-off of military expenditures and a diversion of Soviet resources into stepped-up production of consumer goods. Malenkov may well have been the first Soviet advocate of "minimum deterrence." But these proposals, and the estimate on which they were based, met with stiff opposition from other members of the Party Presidium. Malenkov's opponents warned against complacency and relaxation of the military effort, and emphasized that so long as capitalism existed the possibility of an attack on the Soviet Union was ever present. They refused

³Kommunist (Yerevan), March 12, 1954, as quoted in H.S. Dinerstein, War and the Soviet Union (Praeger, N.Y., 1958), p. 71.

to believe, or at least to concede, that the West would, in Bulganin's words, be satisfied merely to "frighten" the Soviet Union, and they warned that under conditions of rapidly advancing technology it would be fatal to let the Soviet military effort lag.⁴

A hapless theorist who dared suggest that it had now become possible to "paralyze" the operation of Lenin's law on the inevitability of war under imperialism was sharply reminded that laws of history can neither be destroyed nor paralyzed.⁵ Emphasis on the mutually destructive consequences of nuclear war, Malenkov's opponents argued, plays into the hands of the imperialists; it creates the false impression that "the atomic threat is such that the instigators of war will not dare to use their own bombs, since they will not decide to commit suicide." Such a concept, they said, blunts the vigilance of the people toward those "who in the preparation of nuclear war would like to take the peoples by surprise."⁶

⁴Pravda, March 11, 1954.

⁵V. Tereshkin, "The Great Mass Movement of the Present Day," Zvezda, (Leningrad), February, 1954, pp. 139-140, as cited in Dinerstein, op. cit., p. 68.

⁶"The Peoples Decide the Fate of the World and Civilization," Kommunist, No. 4, March 1955, p. 16.

Malenkov's opponents may also have feared that the Soviet Premier's stated belief in the capacity of nuclear war to destroy world civilization might lead him to adopt a more cautious and conciliatory foreign policy in which opportunities for Soviet political gains would be severely limited. Indeed, Malenkov disclosed his view on the consequences of nuclear war in expressing the determination of the Soviet Government to end the cold war. Peaceful coexistence, Malenkov argued, employing another formulation peculiar to him at the time, was now both "necessary and possible."⁷ Presumably it was possible because Soviet acquisition of the hydrogen bomb strengthened what had previously been a weak Soviet bargaining position; and it was necessary because recourse to war could result only in mutual annihilation.

It was the implications of Malenkov's emphasis on the "necessity" of peaceful coexistence that rankled his opponents. As Voroshilov stated shortly after Malenkov was deposed: "We cannot be intimidated by fables that in the event of a new world war civilization will perish."⁸ A journal of the CPSU Central Committee later spelled out the Party's objection to the balance of terror thesis as an "effort to intimidate the

⁷Pravda, January 1, 1955.

⁸Pravda, March 27, 1955. All italics have been added by the author.

working class with atomic weapons, to compel the proletariat to give up the struggle for power and for socialism." It branded those within the socialist camp who predicted mutual annihilation "frightened Philistines, fawning before their [imperialist] masters"; they were "trying to sow terror in the world and to push the toilers on to the path of capitulation to imperialism, allegedly in the interests of the 'self-preservation' of socialism...from the atomic bomb."⁹ The communist objection to basing policy on the acceptance of a state of mutual deterrence has perhaps never been stated more clearly.

The post-Stalin revision of Soviet military doctrine, centering on the role of strategic surprise in nuclear war, reached its culminating point precisely at the time of Malenkov's defeat. There was good reason for this. For while Malenkov emphasized the deterrent effect of thermonuclear weapons, others in the Soviet Union perceived that their effect might be ambivalent. As one Soviet writer put it, nuclear weapons have the double-edged effect of sobering the capitalists and simultaneously arousing in them hopes for a new blitzkrieg.¹⁰ In mid-1954, Soviet political and military leaders for the first time began

⁹V. Platovskii, "The Marxist-Leninist Teaching on the Party and Contemporary Revisionism," V pomoshch' politicheskomu samoobrazovaniyu, No. 6, June, 1958.

¹⁰E.G. Panfilov, "Has War Ceased to be the Continuation of Politics?" Voprosy filosofii, No. 1, 1957, p. 246.

referring publicly to the increased danger of surprise nuclear attack.¹¹

The argument against Malenkov seems to have been that nuclear weapons make surprise attack a particularly tempting strategy for the imperialists, who are predisposed to adopt such a strategy by virtue of their perfidious nature. To meet such an eventuality, it is not enough to rely on the deterrent effect of the Soviet Union's possession of nuclear weapons; the USSR has to strengthen and improve its forces to enable them to deal with a nuclear surprise attack. Hence, the revised doctrine discarded the old Stalinist thesis, to which the USSR had clung dogmatically since World War II, that strategic surprise is an unreliable, "temporary" factor which can not, under any circumstance, play a decisive role in war. The new doctrine held that post-war advances in military technology, notably the advent of nuclear weapons and jet aviation, greatly enhance the role of surprise in war and render surprise attack "particularly dangerous."¹²

¹¹See, for example, Marshal Vasilevsky, Krasnaya zvezda, May 7, 1954; N.A. Bulganin, Pravda, July 22, 1954; K.A. Voroshilov, Pravda, January 1, 1955.

¹²The revised doctrine was expounded in greatest detail by Marshal of Tank Troops P.A. Rotmistrov, Krasnaya zvezda, March 24, 1955, and in "On the Role of Surprise in Contemporary War," Voennaya mysl; No. 2, February, 1955.

The extent to which surprise attack might prove decisive, however, was established only within very broad limits. Regardless of the convictions of the Soviet leaders at the time, it was necessary to avoid creating the impression, at home or abroad, that the USSR believed a surprise attack by the West could succeed. Thus, while it was asserted that surprise attack with weapons of mass destruction could, under certain conditions, play a decisive role in determining the outcome not only of battles, but of war as a whole, these conditions were never precisely defined. Employed against a state with low powers of resistance, arising from radical faults in its economic and social structure and from an unfavorable geographic position, surprise attack could lead to a rapid collapse. But such an attack could not in itself prove conclusive against "a serious and strong opponent," provided he were markedly superior to the attacker in basic military, political, and economic strength (i.e., in the so-called "permanently operating factors" originally defined by Stalin).

From their ominous but ambiguously phrased appraisal of the potentialities of nuclear surprise attack, Soviet military writers reached an appropriately equivocal strategic conclusion: in order not to become the victim of an enemy surprise attack the USSR must be prepared to deal "pre-emptive blows." In theory, this did represent a significant departure from the old Stalinist

doctrine of "active defense," which relied on the ability of the USSR to overcome the initial advantages gained by an enemy to whom the strategic initiative was conceded and to go on to victory in a prolonged war of attrition. But pre-emption is an inherently elusive concept susceptible to a wide range of interpretations and applications. The Soviet writers went no further than to indicate that pre-emption meant something more than mere retaliation, but something less than preventive war.¹³ They did not explain how a "pre-emptive strategy" might be implemented, what kind of warning would be required to activate it, and what type of force structure it called for. Nevertheless, it is likely that important strategic and weapon procurement decisions were made at that time in accordance with Soviet answers to these questions.

II

In the five years since Malenkov's defeat (February 1955), the growth of Soviet military power, particularly the USSR's acquisition of long-range missiles and the new blackmail opportunities created thereby, have led Soviet leaders to revise radically their public estimates of the effectiveness

¹³ Marshal V. Sokolovsky, Izvestiya, February 23, 1955 and M. Rotmistrov, "On the Role of Surprise in Contemporary War," loc. cit., p. 14.

of Soviet deterrence and the likelihood of war. In some respects the current Soviet estimates, expressed now by Khrushchev, resemble those attributed to Malenkov in 1954. There is, however, a fundamental difference: Khrushchev's confidence that the West is deterred is based not on a rough equivalence of strategic power, as Malenkov's apparently was, but on an explicit assertion of the superiority of Soviet strategic forces. "The Soviet Union," Khrushchev has boasted, "is now the world's strongest military power."¹⁴

At the XXI Party Congress in January, 1959, Khrushchev declared that the balance of forces had shifted so markedly in favor of the socialist camp, that the danger of capitalist restoration in the USSR was now finally excluded. In the USSR "socialism has triumphed not only fully, but irreversibly."¹⁵ The end of "capitalist encirclement" has been officially proclaimed: "At present," Khrushchev stated in 1958, "it is not known who encircles whom, the capitalist countries the socialist states, or vice versa."¹⁶

These claims have been accompanied by increasingly confident assertions about the deterrent effect of Soviet military strength,

¹⁴Izvestiya, March 2, 1960.

¹⁵Pravda, January 28, 1959.

¹⁶Pravda, March 27, 1958.

i.e., assertions that the shift in the balance of forces is now understood in the West. Thus, Khrushchev declared in May, 1959:

The imperialists know our strength. To attack us is tantamount to suicide; one would have to be insane for this. I do not believe they are as stupid as all that; they understand the consequences which the unleashing of war against the socialist countries may have for them.¹⁷

And a few months later, Khrushchev reiterated this estimate, leaving no doubt about its authoritativeness by attributing it to the Party Central Committee and the Soviet Government:

Comrades, the Central Committee of our Party and the Soviet Government believe that a situation has at present been created in which the imperialists will hardly dare to launch a war against our motherland or against the countries of socialism. Our forces and those of our socialist allies are colossal and in the West, apparently, this is now understood.¹⁸

The possibility that a madman, like Hitler, might embark upon a suicidal adventure, has been conceded, but Khrushchev has expressed confidence that such adventures could be "cut short" or that "a straightjacket can be found" for such a madman.¹⁹ Since late 1957 the Soviet leaders have been de-emphasizing the danger of a rational, premeditated attack by the West against the USSR, stressing instead, in Khrushchev's words, "the grave danger that even a slight miscalculation by

¹⁷Pravda, June 1, 1959.

¹⁸Pravda, July 30, 1959.

¹⁹Pravda, January 28, 1959, and October 15, 1958.

statesmen in one country or another may lead to yet another war."²⁰ The danger that war might result from a technical accident or from an irrational act by a subordinate officer has also been a standard Soviet line since the fall of 1957. But war, which several years ago was still thought inevitable so long as capitalism existed, is now officially no longer "fatalistically inevitable" and may soon (1965) "be excluded from the life of society."²¹

Khrushchev has insisted that the probability of a premeditated Western attack on the USSR has been reduced "not because the imperialists have become wiser or kinder, but because they have become weaker." He has likened the West and its yearning to destroy the socialist countries to a hungry wolf, with blunt fangs, lusting to kill a powerful lion.²²

In the past five years, too, and particularly since the 1957 Soviet ICBM test announcement, the Soviet leaders have been far less reluctant than before to focus attention on the destructiveness of nuclear war. Indeed, now that the Soviet strategic nuclear capability is well established, rather than merely emergent, the image of vastly destructive nuclear war is deliberately raised in support of Soviet diplomatic blackmail.

²⁰Pravda, August 31, 1959.

²¹Pravda, February 14, 1956, and January 28, 1958. These quotations are from Khrushchev's speeches at the XX and XXI CPSU Congresses respectively. They were incorporated into the resolutions of the Party Congresses and have since been repeated frequently in other official Party documents.

²²Pravda, March 27, 1959.

To back up his political demands, Khrushchev has often reminded his antagonists of the USSR's capability to put countries "out of commission" or to "wipe them from the face of the earth" with nuclear-missiles. He has thereby introduced into Soviet discussions of modern war what might be termed the concept of "country-busting."

Initially, Khrushchev aimed his "country-busting" threats exclusively at the NATO allies of the United States. In seeking to neutralize U.S. strategic nuclear power and to destroy the confidence of America's allies in the reliability of U.S. protection, Khrushchev repeatedly emphasized that Soviet ICBM's made the United States vulnerable to nuclear attack. Yet he seemed to distinguish between the vulnerability of the NATO allies, on one hand, and the U.S., on the other, to Soviet attack on a "country-busting" scale. In November, 1959, he collapsed this distinction. "We now have stockpiled so many rockets, so many atomic and hydrogen warheads," he said, "that, if we were attacked, we could wipe from the face of the earth all of our probable opponents."²³ He repeated this claim the following month and again in January 1960.²⁴

²³Pravda, November 14, 1959.

²⁴Pravda, December 2, 1959, and January 15, 1959.

As Khrushchev stepped up his claims concerning the level of destruction which the USSR could inflict on the United States in the event of war, he also began to acknowledge for the first time that nuclear war would have destructive consequences for the USSR as well. It was only after acquiring the ICBM that Soviet leaders began to refer explicitly to the damage the Soviet Union might expect to suffer in a new world war. They may have calculated that precisely because the ICBM had made America vulnerable, the United States needed to be reassured that the USSR was also aware of its own vulnerability and would therefore not lightly plunge the world into nuclear war. Thus, Khrushchev has spoken of the "great losses," "great damage," "great sacrifices," and "no little destruction" that the West could inflict upon the USSR, if it attacked.²⁵

But he stopped far short of Malenkov's prediction of the outcome of a new war. Khrushchev has not said that World War III would end in mutual annihilation, the destruction of civilization, or the extinction of mankind. On the contrary, he has several times explicitly denied such an outcome. If war is unleashed, he once said, "despite great losses, mankind will not only survive, but will continue to develop."²⁶ Soviet insistence

²⁵ See Pravda, November 19, 1957; May 9, 1959; May 11, 1959; July 30, 1959; and January 15, 1960.

²⁶ Pravda, October 11, 1957.

on this point was illustrated on April 27, 1958, when the Soviet press excised from the published version of a speech by Voroshilov, broadcast while he delivered it the day before, a passage which stated that a new war would result "not just in bloodshed, but in the simple annihilation of all life on earth."²⁷

The prediction, invoked against Malenkov in 1955, that capitalism, not socialism or world civilization, would perish in a new war, continues in force. In Khrushchev's words:

...We are convinced that as a result of a new war, should it be unleashed by capitalist circles, the system which creates wars, that is, the capitalist system, would perish, and the socialist system would win.²⁸

Moreover, recent Soviet statements have forecast not only the collapse of the capitalist system, an outcome not tied to any specific level of physical destruction, but also, as stated above, the obliteration of capitalist countries, which could be "wiped from the face of the earth" in a new war. Thus, Khrushchev has now invoked the threat of maximum retaliatory damage against the West.

Finally, Soviet acknowledgements that the West could inflict "great damage" upon the USSR are invariably coupled with assertions

²⁷Cited in Dinerstein, op. cit., p. 79.

²⁸Pravda, November 7, 1957.

that the West would suffer even more severely in a new war. In discussing expected Soviet war losses, Khrushchev has several times pointed out that the greater land mass and more widely dispersed urban population and industries of the USSR give it important advantages over Western countries, including the United States, which enable it to limit damage to the Soviet population and economy.²⁹

In his speech on military affairs, delivered to the Supreme Soviet on January 14, 1960, Khrushchev differentiated explicitly between expected war outcomes for the USSR and the West:

Of course, in the event of a new world war all countries would ultimately suffer in one way or another. We, too, would endure great misfortunes; we would have many losses, but we would survive. Our territory is immense and the population is less concentrated in major industrial centers than in many other countries. The West would suffer incomparably more.³⁰

It should also be noted that the Soviet losses which have been explicitly conceded refer to a war initiated by the West. We do not know the Soviet leaders' estimate of the losses which the West might be able to inflict upon the USSR after

²⁹ See, for example, Pravda, November 19, 1957, May 9, 1959, May 11, 1959, and January 15, 1959. Also Marshal Vershinin's interview in Pravda, September 8, 1957.

³⁰ Pravda, January 15, 1960.

being subjected to a Soviet first-strike, for this possibility, of course, is not discussed.

But what of the danger of surprise attack? Malenkov's estimate of the deterrent effect of Soviet nuclear weapons was deficient because it overlooked the enhanced potentialities of nuclear surprise attack. Might not the significance of the new weapons which have come upon the scene since 1955, and on which Khrushchev's confidence in the current effectiveness of Soviet deterrence is based, be equally ambivalent? The revised Soviet military doctrine of 1955 emphasized the vital link between the state of military technology and the role of surprise in war. The role of surprise in war, according to Soviet Fleet, "changes substantially in accordance with the level of development of military technology."³¹

Soviet political and military leaders were as quick to proclaim that long-range missiles were revolutionizing modern warfare as they had been slow to acknowledge that nuclear weapons had significant military worth. The ICBM, Major General Talensky declared in March 1958, represents "not a quantitative increase in the possibilities of strategy, but a qualitative

³¹Sovetskii flot, December 11, 1958.

leap which fundamentally changes the methods and forms of modern warfare."³² Despite the traditional Soviet view that there can be no such thing as a decisive weapon in war, the ICBM was soon called precisely that, both by Khrushchev and by the aforementioned General Talensky, who is perhaps the leading Soviet military theorist.³³ At the XXI Party Congress in January, 1959, when Khrushchev announced that the USSR had begun serial production of ICBM's, Marshal Malinovsky declared that the Soviet Union considered the rocket weapon "precisely the weapon best answering the demands of contemporary warfare," and that it was capable of effectively accomplishing both strategic and tactical tasks on land, sea, and in the air.³⁴

Soon after the Soviet ICBM test in August 1957, Soviet writers began to stress the point that acquisition of long-range missiles by the USSR had radically transformed the strategic picture: gone forever was traditional U.S. invulnerability; the importance of strategic air forces was sharply reduced; and the military value of U.S. overseas bases was

³²Major General N. Talensky, "The Question of Military Strategy and Foreign Policy," Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn', No. 3, March, 1958, pp. 34-35.

³³Pravda, November 29, 1957 and Major General Talensky, loc. cit., p. 34.

³⁴Pravda, February 4, 1959.

radically diminished.³⁵ These strategic consequences are doubtless important, but they clearly do not exhaust the subject. It is remarkable that the Russians have said virtually nothing publicly about the distinctive advantages of long-range missiles for surprise attack. Little more has been done than to add the ICBM to nuclear weapons and jet aviation in the list of weapons whose advent, according to the 1955 formula, has "significantly increased the importance of surprise attack." Only once has a Soviet writer called attention to the special advantages of the ICBM for achieving strategic surprise, and this in a book published in 1956, more than a year before TASS announced that the USSR had successfully tested an ICBM. The statement was excised from the second edition published in 1959.³⁶

Clearly, Soviet priority in developing the ICBM has colored everything that has been written in the USSR about the strategic implications of the weapon. In Soviet hands, the ICBM is, by

³⁵See, for example, "A Policy from Positions of Folly," International Affairs, No. 12, December, 1957; M. Rubinstein, "Science and International Relations," Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, No. 6, June, 1958; and N. Inozemtsev, "'Atomic Diplomacy' of the U.S.A.: Projects and Reality," Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, No. 3, March, 1958.

³⁶[Major General] G.I. Pokrovsky, Nauka i tekhnika v sovremannykh voynakh, Moscow, 1956, p. 51.

definition, exclusively a retaliatory weapon. As General Talensky wrote: "In the Soviet Union no one speaks or even thinks of using our advantage for preventive war or sudden attack on anyone."³⁷

There is evidence, however, that the status of the surprise attack factor remains an unsettled and perhaps even contentious issue in Soviet military circles. The evident constraints on public discussion of this sensitive question have beclouded the issue, but have not obscured differences among various views on surprise attack that have been advanced in theoretical articles since 1958. In 1955, Soviet writers on doctrine discarded the Stalinist thesis on the decisive importance of the "permanently operating factors." This thesis had automatically precluded surprise, a "temporary factor," from being considered decisive. Theoretical discussion was centered instead on the "basic" factors, no longer distinguished by any alleged long- or short-term effects in war.

While surprise was at first not explicitly identified as one of the "basic factors" in war, it was so identified in the summer of 1958 in a Soviet Air Force newspaper article.³⁸ When this

³⁷Major General Talensky, loc. cit., p. 26.

³⁸Sovetskaya aviatsiya, August 12, 1958.

article was later revised for publication in a Defense Ministry textbook on military theory, surprise was withdrawn from the list of basic factors; and several paragraphs were rewritten to imply that strategic surprise could not have a decisive influence on more than a phase of a war.³⁹ Two other Soviet writers in 1958 revived the old Stalinist concepts of "permanently operating" and "temporary" factors, but only to deny their former import, for they now included surprise attack among the factors that could decide the outcome of a war. One colonel argued that surprise is a "temporary" factor, but only in the contingent sense that theoretically wars can be fought and won without its employment. If employed successfully, however, surprise could be decisive.⁴⁰ Another colonel asserted that surprise is in fact now being transformed into a "permanently operating factor" as a result of advances in weapon technology.⁴¹

³⁹I. Korotkov, "The Basic Factors Deciding the Course and Outcome of War," in V pomoshch' ofitseram izuchayushchim marksistsko-leninskuyu teoriyu, Moscow, 1959, p. 237.

⁴⁰Colonel S. Kozlov, "On Some Questions of Soviet Military Science," ibid., pp. 201-203.

⁴¹Colonel P. Sidorov, "The Creative Character of Soviet Military Science," Sovetskii flot, December 11, 1958.

III

Khrushchev first discussed the surprise attack question in his January 14, 1960 speech before the Supreme Soviet.⁴² In justifying his proposed one-third cut in the Soviet armed forces, Khrushchev outlined a comprehensive strategic doctrine that brought together the ideas about modern war that he has been propounding publicly since mid-1957. These ideas have now been raised to the level of military doctrine and have been endorsed by the top marshals and admirals, though perhaps grudgingly by some. Thus, Khrushchev's intervention into the military domain has reached its culmination. As chief military strategist, he has rapidly accelerated the slow and sometimes halting transition of Soviet doctrine from the old battlefield-oriented concept of war to a new concept in which strategic nuclear weapons play the dominant role.

In Khrushchev's concept of modern war, the ability to withstand a surprise attack appears to be the most severe test to which a military force can be subjected. And it was this test that he used in his contention that the USSR's strategic position was "unassailable" and that therefore the size of the armed forces could be substantially reduced with no loss to

⁴²All references to this speech are from the text published in Pravda, January 15, 1960.

security. His discussion of strategic surprise can be understood only if its context is considered. He first asserted that the firepower now embodied in the Soviet strategic missile force provided the USSR with a second-strike capability of absolutely devastating proportions. But he conceded that "unassailability" was a "rather relative term" and that it was at least possible that the current favorable balance of forces might change. He therefore examined a hypothetical case based on a deliberately pessimistic assumption about the future course of the arms race. What would be the strategic position of the USSR relative to the West, he asked, if the capitalist countries should achieve parity with the Soviet Union in the missile field? His reply to this question and his ensuing remarks on surprise attack are of great importance and require close analysis. They are reproduced below as translated by the author:

The question suggests itself, however: since the possibility is not excluded that some capitalist states may draw even with us in the field of modern weapons, could they not act perfidiously and strike us first in order to exploit the factor of surprise attack by means of such a formidable weapon as the nuclear-missile and thereby have advantages for achieving victory? No. Modern means of war give no such advantages to either side...

Let us assume, however, that some state or group of states would succeed in preparing and launching a surprise attack on a power possessing nuclear and missile weapons. Even supposing for a moment that the attacking side really succeeded in striking its blow

by surprise, could it at one blow put out of commission all the stockpiles of nuclear weapons, all the missile installations on the territory of the power subjected to attack? Of course not. The state subjected to surprise attack, provided, of course, that it is a sufficiently large state, would always have the means to give the aggressor a due rebuff.

We take into account that foreign military bases are located around our country. Therefore, we are deploying our missile force in such a way as to ensure duplication and triplication [of target coverage]. The territory of our country is immense; we are able to disperse our missile force, to camouflage it well. We are creating such a system that if some means designated for delivering a retaliatory blow should be put out of commission, we would always be able to bring into action duplicate means and destroy the targets from reserve positions.

Some Western observers have interpreted these remarks as expressing Khrushchev's belief that surprise attack is not a feasible strategy for either the West or the USSR to employ because it could not preclude unacceptable retaliatory damage. It has been concluded on the basis of this interpretation that Soviet grand strategy is oriented on the acceptance of a state of mutual deterrence.⁴³ This interpretation is not borne out by the evidence and requires a number of highly questionable assumptions: (1) that large gaps in Khrushchev's argument may

⁴³ See, for example, Jack Raymond's dispatch from Washington, The New York Times, January 16, 1960; C.L. Sulzberger's dispatch from Paris, The New York Times, May 16, 1960, p. 30; and "Soviet Attitudes on the Use of Military Power," Army Information Digest, June, 1960, p. 35.

be filled with ad hoc assumptions; (2) that Khrushchev's deliberately pessimistic estimate of the future course of the missile race, adopted here to construct a "worst case" hypothesis, is his real view; and (3) that all ambiguities in his remarks can be resolved in favor of the preferred interpretation.

The gaps and ambiguities in Khrushchev's argument are deliberate and not the result of carelessness. Khrushchev exercised great care in executing a difficult task. This task was to satisfy diverse and partially contradictory rhetorical objectives within the framework of a reasonable argument that did not explicitly violate commonly accepted facts nor, it may be supposed, Khrushchev's beliefs. Khrushchev undoubtedly wished to reassure the Soviet people and to warn the West that his proposed force reduction would not jeopardize Soviet security, now or in the future. But while emphasizing that the growing Soviet missile force more than compensates for the proposed reduction in personnel, he had to reassure his opponents at the same time that this force did not threaten their security. Still another objective is suggested by the extreme care with which Khrushchev chose his words: he evidently did not wish to reassure his opponents to such an extent as to deprive his current missile superiority claims and his predictions of future superiority of their political value. Furthermore, while he did not now wish to assert, or perhaps even to imply, that the Soviet Union

had or might acquire a first-strike capability, he nevertheless did not want to preclude this possibility or to foreclose some future claim under circumstances he might deem more propitious.

The question arises whether Khrushchev believes that the West's current strategic forces could with assurance deliver a second-strike after a Soviet surprise attack implemented by missiles. Khrushchev did not answer this question, for he neglected in any of his remarks to assess the capability of a strategic striking force composed primarily of manned bombers to survive a surprise attack delivered by missiles. Khrushchev referred exclusively to the survival capability of strategic missile forces. When he stated that "modern means of war give no such advantages to either side," it is clear, both from the context of his remarks and from the fact that in the preceding sentence he had used "modern weapons" to mean nuclear-missiles, that he was referring only to missiles. Thus, contrary to what some Western observers have supposed, Khrushchev did not vouch for the capability of the West's current strategic forces to survive a surprise attack by Soviet missiles, which, Khrushchev has claimed, the USSR is mass-producing.

Optimistic Western interpretations of Khrushchev's remarks about the future survival capability of Western forces are based on Khrushchev's pessimistic estimate of the future East-

West missile balance. But Khrushchev voiced the USSR's determination to ensure that the hypothetical "missile-parity" case he contrived would remain purely hypothetical. "We intend," he said, to "make the most of our lead-time" and "to retain our leading position." The U.S. goal, Khrushchev stated, is to equal Soviet missile production within a period of five years, "but it would be naive to imagine that we shall sit with folded arms." Thus, to the extent that Khrushchev's remarks about assured second-strike capabilities are applicable to the West, they look beyond the period of the so-called "missile gap," which Khrushchev said was not likely to be closed to all.

If one assumes, however, the Khrushchev's pessimistic estimate turns out to be correct, can it be inferred from his remarks that he believes missile-parity would in itself preclude retaliation-proof surprise attacks? He seems to assert this, with but one qualification: the country subjected to attack would always be able to retaliate, "provided, of course, it is a sufficiently large country." Khrushchev was not speaking here of the capabilities of countries to limit population and economic damage, but to ensure the survival of their second-strike missile capabilities. Therefore, he evidently means that in addition to having a missile force comparable or equal in size to that of a potential attacker, a country must be "sufficiently large"

to satisfy certain missile deployment requirements essential to survival. Even a large force of missiles, if concentrated in clusters on soft bases, might be highly vulnerable to surprise attack by a missile force of inferior numerical strength.

This inference is strengthened by the fact that Khrushchev immediately goes on to discuss the deployment of the current and programmed Soviet missile force. He refers explicitly to three different protective deployment measures: dispersal, camouflage, and double and triple coverage of targets. The first two measures are facilitated by the "immense territory" of the Soviet Union and by its superior ability to preserve military secrecy. The third measure, duplicate targeting, would be facilitated by quantitative superiority in missiles, such as claimed for the USSR by Khrushchev. The number of missiles required to support a duplicate targeting system would depend on the number and character of the targets to be covered: for example, a fixed number of cities, a rising number of military targets, or a combination of both. Since some Soviet military leaders have emphasized the need for a pre-emptive capability, the USSR might prefer to create a duplicate targeting system based on the counterforce mission. And such a system, if its

coverage were extensive and its targets relatively soft, might be as compatible with a first-strike strategy as with a posture designed to ensure the "unassailability" of the USSR.⁴⁴

IV

The explosion of the first Soviet hydrogen bomb in August 1953, only nine months after the first U.S. thermonuclear detonation, brought the USSR to the threshold of "nuclear parity" with the United States and presented Stalin's successors with

⁴⁴ Since the U-2 incident, Khrushchev has broadly hinted that the USSR may be taking other protective measures for its strategic missile bases designed to enable them to survive attack even if their locations become known to the U.S. Addressing the III Congress of the Rumanian Workers Party in Bucharest on June 21, the Soviet Premier attacked the American contention that the U-2 program was initiated to avert the danger of a Soviet surprise attack. He first asserted that the information obtained by the U.S. as a result of the U-2 overflights had no significance for the defense of the United States. The U-2's, Khrushchev claimed, overflew and photographed Soviet missile test centers, but not "strategic-military missile bases." Even if Soviet missile bases were to be photographed, he went on, this information would have no significance for averting surprise attack (i.e., it would not add to U.S. second-strike capabilities). Such information, he said, could have significance only for a state which intended to strike first and wished therefore to destroy its opponent's missile bases in order to escape retaliation. But even for first-strike purposes, the usefulness of such information would be limited by certain characteristics of modern missile bases: "True, given modern means, missile bases cannot be put out of commission by one, two, or several blows; rocket technology now ensures the possibility of delivering a retaliatory blow in any case." (Pravda, June 22, 1960) Khrushchev may here have been alluding to hardening, or perhaps to mobile systems.

a new set of military and political alternatives from which to choose in charting their country's course. In considering these alternatives in 1953-1954, the question of the reliability of deterrence became the focal point of intensive intra-Party controversy: Did the advent of thermonuclear weapons mean that fear of destroying world civilization would curb imperialist aggressiveness? Was the Soviet Union's nuclear capability sufficiently powerful to deter a Western attack? The victorious Party faction answered these questions negatively and proceeded to intensify the Soviet military build-up. But during the past five years, under the impact of the USSR's greatly enhanced strategic nuclear capability and particularly its acquisition of long-range missiles, the attitude of Soviet leaders toward the reliability of deterrence has undergone a marked transformation. Though not excluding the possibility of war resulting from accident or miscalculation, the Soviet leaders now seem confident of their ability to deter a rational, premeditated Western decision to initiate general war. In the new strategic context created by the rapid growth of Soviet military power, the central question for the Soviet leadership is not so much the reliability of deterrence, which remains the West's major preoccupation, as the adequacy of a deterrence posture to satisfy the broad requirements of Soviet policy.

Deterrence is an appropriate strategy for a status quo power uninterested in territorial expansion or in the acquisition of new spheres of influence. It is doubtless an element in Soviet strategy, too, but it is not the whole of that strategy. The Soviet leaders would probably regard deterrence alone as an unworthy objective for their global strategy and mutual deterrence as an inadequate outcome of their great military and political exertions. At best they can regard a deterrent posture as necessary to reduce to tolerable levels the risks associated with their political aggrandizement in a world of nuclear weapons. A prolonged state of mutual deterrence can be acceptable to the USSR only if its political effects are less than perfectly symmetrical: a usable residue of intimidation must remain.

It is perhaps for this reason that theories of mutual annihilation are so repugnant to the Soviet leaders. Mutual preoccupation with survival, which such theories imply, can lead only to political paralysis; and while the paralysis of the enemy is most desirable, it must not be bought at the cost of self-paralysis. Nuclear war, the Soviet leaders assert, would be a terrible ordeal for all participants, and even for non-belligerents; but while the Western powers would be "wiped from the face of the earth," the Soviet Union would survive and communism would triumph throughout the world. It has been shown

that Khrushchev insists on distinguishing between the "great losses" that the Soviet Union might have to endure and the "incomparably" greater losses which a new war would inflict on the West. The anticipated Soviet losses may be more than the Soviet leaders would willingly bear, and their acknowledgement that these losses might be great tends to reassure the West that they would not lightly plunge the world into nuclear war. But the gap between the Soviet and Western losses they predict may be intended to imply that the range of extreme circumstances which might compel a resort to war is greater for the USSR than for the West. And while Khrushchev has asserted that Soviet missile superiority makes infeasible a Western surprise attack strategy, thus precluding the last chance for the West to achieve a tolerable military outcome, he has not ruled out such a strategy for the USSR.

Khrushchev, in effect, seems to be telling the West: "If it is true that we are both deterred, you are more deterred than we."

