

Toward a new Soviet military doctrine?

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We excerpt here a June 24 presentation, "Toward a New Soviet Military Doctrine?" by General Berkhof of the Royal Netherlands Army, to a London EIR seminar on electromagnetic weapons. General Berkhof was the Chief of Staff of NATO'S Allied Forces Central Europe Command until October 1986. The excerpts chosen convey the general's broad analysis and conclusions; the full text, which contains much additional valuable historical and military analysis, is available on request from the editors.

Reading Western newspapers and magazines, one cannot avoid the impression that there is a steady wind of change blowing in the Soviet Union. Censorship is being relaxed, it seems, some posts are being filled by election rather than appointment by local "apparatchiks," emigration rules have become less restrictive, and many schemes to improve the economy are being announced. Even the Soviet armed forces have come under the aegis of *perestroika*. Commentators are talking about the need to hold forces to a level of "reasonable sufficiency." At the same time they are stressing the "defensiveness" of Soviet military doctrine. Secretary Gorbachov, moreover, is openly calling for the removal of nuclear arsenals by the year 2000 and acceleration of the arms control negotiations, making him probably a more popular figure in the West than in his own country.

That the Soviet Union is in a state of flux cannot be denied. Things are definitely changing there, though probably at a slower pace than the prime architects of *perestroika* would wish. There is resistance within the party's rank and file and a large segment of the population has adopted a "wait and see" attitude. Some Western politicians fear that this resistance will put an end to what they call the beginning of a "new era in East-West relations." What precisely they mean by this remains unclear in most cases. Pressed for an answer, some say that continued resistance to Gorbachov's plans could endanger the arms control "process," explaining away one vague term with another. Others see the reforms as an

attempt to "Westernize" Soviet society, as a first step toward democracy, forgetting that since Peter the Great embarked on his reforms in the late 17th century, Russian and Soviet rulers have striven to achieve "modernization" rather than "Westernization." They also ignore the fact that history shows that rulers who tried to modernize Russian society were not the least expansionist ones. Yet, guided by hope rather than by cool analysis, these optimists are flocking to Moscow to pledge support for Gorbachov's plans. They are extending loans to the Soviet Union (sometimes on more favorable conditions than allowed to Third World countries), offering trade deals (as much for political as for economic reasons), and proposing cultural and scientific exchange programs.

If enduring good relations with the Soviet Union could be "bought," this would probably be an excellent policy, but it is doubtful whether they can. Certainly, Gorbachov needs *peredyshka*, a "breathing space" to implement his plans, just as Lenin did to pursue his New Economic Policy in the 1920s. Like Lenin, Gorbachov also needs Western capital, technology and know-how to boost the sluggish Soviet economy, and this undoubtedly affects the style of Soviet foreign policy. It is highly unlikely, however, that it will have any effect on the overall objective of this policy: gaining the upper hand in the ongoing "struggle between Socialism and Capitalism."

As Richard Staar notes: "The goal is a rebuilt, economically more powerful Soviet Union, which would again project an image of a modern sociopolitical system for the rest of the world; this, in turn, is expected ultimately to benefit all national communist parties. Moscow sees a period of global détente as a main prerequisite for this process. Interdependence and cooperation, thus, should replace East-West confrontation during this breathing spell (*peredyshka*) ["Checklist of Communist Parties in 1987," *Problems of Communism*, Jan.-Feb. 1988, p. 2].

In the military sphere, the emphasis will also be on means rather than ends. Do more with less, will probably be the motto here. It will not be a simple choice between guns and butter, but rather a matter of guns and (some) butter now and advanced weaponry, a more effective military strategy, and more butter later. How this can be done will probably still require a lot of "new thinking" within the Soviet political and military leadership. However, some of the effects of this process are already discernible, such as the attempts to increase the overall effectiveness of the forces and tighten their discipline. Other changes are less clear. We are, for instance, still in the dark about the military strategy to be adopted and about the force structure required to implement that strategy. We can, however, get some idea of these aspects by taking into account the constants of Soviet strategy and by looking at the problems confronting the Soviet Defense Council and the General Staff, and at the solutions available to them.

Perestroika and the armed forces

Before the replacement on May 30, 1987 of the aging

Marshal Sergei Sokolov as minister of defense by Gen. Dmitri Yazov, there were few signs that the Soviet military paid more than lip service to Gorbachov's *perestroika*. Indeed, the appointment of Yazov, who was nominated over the head of more senior officers, was probably also meant as a strong signal to the military establishment to get on with the business of "restructuring." . . .

Although it is likely to take some time for the military bureaucracy to respond, *military perestroika* will eventually result in a meaner and leaner military machine. Incorporating the combat experience gained in Afghanistan—many officers with a good record there are being rapidly promoted—will further speed up this process.

The constants in Soviet strategy

Strategy is shaped by a number of factors, the most important of which is probably geography. The vastness of the Soviet Union—the country stretches through 11 time zones—and the lack of natural barriers in the likely avenues of approach in the East and West precluded the development of defensive strategies. Even with mass armies, the troops would be so thinly spread that the defensive line could be breached quite easily. The art of moving forces over great distances and concentrating them for offensive purposes or against the greatest enemy threat thus became a basic tenet of Russian and Soviet strategy. The vast distances also facilitated a strategy of operating in the enemy's rear. History shows that in every major conflict since the beginning of the 19th century, Russian troops have operated behind the enemy lines. The operations of these Cossacks, partisans, or special raiding parties were always closely coordinated with the campaigns of the regular formations. The vastness of the country also explains the need for conscript forces. Smaller regular forces would be of no avail in this huge country.

Another geographical feature of the Soviet Union is its extreme flatness. This strengthens the emphasis on maneuver warfare. . . .

Soviet officers know that technology exerts a profound influence on strategy. . . . Paradoxically, the emphasis on military technology has substantial drawbacks. One of the reasons is that military R&D and production in the Soviet Union are surrounded by secrecy, which virtually splits the technological base into a well-developed military segment and a rather backward civilian segment, preventing the dynamic and creative interaction between the civilian and military applications of technology that we know in the West. . . .

The Soviet General Staff looks far ahead. For instance, as early as 1962, Marshal Sokolovsky, in the first edition of his book *Military Strategy*, had this to say on weapons based on new physical principles:

"Possibilities are being studied for the use, against rockets, of a stream of high-speed neutrons as small detonators for the nuclear charge of the rocket, and the use of electromagnetic energy to destroy the rocket charge in the descent

phase of the trajectory or to deflect it from its target. Various radiation, anti-gravity, and anti-matter systems, plasma (ball lightning), etc. are also being studied as a means of destroying rockets. Special attention is devoted to lasers ('death rays'); it is considered that in the future, any missile and satellite can be destroyed with powerful lasers."

This text was omitted from later editions; no doubt a matter of *maskirovka* in view of the pending ABM and SALT negotiations. . . .

In addition to geography, history, and technology, Soviet strategy is also shaped by ideological and cultural factors. Of course, a junior commander of the Soviet Army taking part in a field exercise, does not do so with the ideals of Marxist-Leninist ideology constantly before him. Nevertheless, he has been influenced by those ideals since childhood. In school, youth organizations, and the schools and academies of the Army, world events, the environment, and the behavior of his classmates were all measured by this ideology, just as he himself was judged by it. . . . This militarization is facilitated by the almost innate distrust of strangers and the fact that most Russians traditionally regard a strong army as a sign that all is well in the country. Moreover, the Soviet people are told that the strength of the armed forces of the Soviet Union was instrumental in *forcing* the capitalist countries to adopt a policy of *peaceful coexistence*. . . .

Changes in Soviet military doctrine

After the Great Patriotic War, military doctrine still closely reflected the experiences of the victorious Red Army. The doctrine emphasized the operations of the land forces in which groups of Fronts played a dominant role. The effect of nuclear weapons was played down. . . .

This military doctrine was no longer tenable after the NATO decision in 1957 to drop the Lisbon force goals of more than 90 (!) divisions and concentrate instead on nuclear weapons to offset the superior Soviet conventional forces. NATO's decision had the effect of creating a "balance of imbalances": Large numbers of nuclear weapons of intercontinental and shorter range would compensate for the lack of conventional combat power, thus creating (at least) strategic parity at substantially lower costs. This *revolution in military affairs* created a profound dilemma for the Soviet military and political leaders. After an intense debate, Khrushchov issued a new military doctrine in 1960 that emphasized the role of nuclear forces and, in particular, of strategic nuclear forces. The *Strategic Rocket Forces* (SRF), established some months earlier as a separate Service, became the main branch of the Soviet armed forces. The role of the Army was deemphasized. . . .

The strong emphasis on nuclear weapons did not go uncontested, however. Some officers felt that in a nuclear war, due to the high attrition rates, more rather than fewer divisions would be needed, while others doubted whether the SRF could carry out their mission. . . .

These doubts grew when President Kennedy announced his plans for the modernization of the American strategic nuclear forces at the beginning of the 1960s. . . . This meant that the SRF was not only heavily outnumbered, but also inferior in the qualitative sense. It could, moreover, in no way carry out its primary mission: the destruction of the American nuclear forces. This could not be camouflaged by rhetoric, so in 1962, in a desperate attempt to redress the balance, Khrushchov tried to outflank the United States by deploying medium- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles

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in Cuba. When the attempt failed, criticism of this “one-sided military doctrine” grew, especially in Army circles. Attempts to silence these critics by relieving the Army of its Service status and placing the forces directly under the control of the General Staff—an unprecedented move in Soviet history—made matters even worse and was probably one of the reasons for his fall in October 1964.

After Khrushchov’s departure, the Soviet Union quickly moved away from its over-reliance on nuclear weapons. . . .

The buildup of both nuclear and conventional forces . . . convinced the Soviet leaders that a military doctrine emphasizing conventional operations, albeit under the threat of the use of nuclear weapons, was now the best option. . . .

Toward a new military doctrine?

The Soviet leaders are highly unlikely to meet these challenges to their military doctrine with a renewed emphasis on nuclear weapons. The costs of a victory in a nuclear war are considered so excessive that such a doctrine would not be viable. Moreover, as their recent efforts in arms control negotiations show, they prefer a “non-nuclear battlefield.” Their successes in these negotiations—an INF Treaty in which the West has traded strategy for numbers—can only have encouraged them to pursue this course more vigorously. We

can therefore expect an intensive *peace campaign*, with a plethora of proposals to eliminate or greatly reduce the number of shorter-range nuclear weapons in Western Europe and to establish Nordic nuclear-free zones and areas free of nuclear weapons along the “dividing line in Europe” (also encompassing Turkey and Greece), in addition to proposals on no first-use of nuclear weapons. Proposals of this kind have the added advantage of appealing to large segments of the population in the West, and could thus split the Alliance politically.

They could also strive for a ban on advanced conventional weapons on the grounds that such weapons have almost the same effect as nuclear weapons, and although they could not entertain much hope that the West would not deploy such weapons in the future, they at least hope to be able to delay their introduction. A prominent target for the call to slow down the “spiraling arms race” will also be the Strategic Defense Initiative. But here they have leverage in addition to rhetoric. The prospect of significantly reducing the number of strategic nuclear weapons appeals to many Americans, including the present administration, so some compromise on SDI could be in the offing, not least because Michael Dukakis, the Democratic presidential candidate, has expressed the view that the program should be terminated.

A proposal for a significant reduction of conventional forces in Eastern and Western Europe could also weaken NATO, even if Moscow consented to asymmetrical cuts. There are two reasons for this. First, large-scale reductions would mean that NATO would be unable to muster enough forces for either a coherent defense in the Central Sector or for in-place operational reserves. This would enhance the Soviet ability to conduct encirclement operations. Second, the Soviet Union is experimenting with new types of units, such as a Unified Army Corps and air assault brigades, that can be brought up to full war strength very quickly and that can be moved to the front much faster than British or American reserves.

Efforts to outflank NATO politically with a *peace offensive* would come in addition to measures taken unilaterally to ensure the viability of the main ingredients of the present military doctrine. For instance, *maskirovka* could be used to mask attempts to place greater emphasis on spetsnaz forces, or to outflank NATO in a technological sense. NATO’s lead in advanced weapons using modern electronics could be negated by introducing radio frequency or high-powered microwave weapons that can destroy electronic components in addition to disorienting and killing people.

In short, the Soviets will leave no stone unturned both to confuse NATO and to weaken it in a political and military sense, while at the same time pressing ahead with refinements to their present military doctrine. They need *peredyshka*, a breathing space in which to boost their ailing economy. They will not allow themselves any such breathing space in the military competition with the West.