

The net result of Mr. Gorbachev's reform is unclear. The USSR has become even more of a military powerhouse on his watch.

The Soviet Empire Seeks a Course

BY THOM SHANKER

WITH Moscow's interests being battered by one setback after another, the state of the Soviet superpower is coming under close scrutiny. At issue are questions about the purpose—even the utility—of Soviet military power.

The last true empire in the world, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has amassed a fearsome military arsenal and fielded millions of men at arms in the decades since the Cold War began at the end of World War II. Depending on who is doing the talking, the Soviet Union is conceded to have either the first or the second mightiest military force on earth.

As the partner of the ruling Communist Party, the Soviet military has been aided by internal militia and KGB secret-police shock troops in maintaining order and securing cohesion in a land that is really many nations within a common border, spanning eleven time zones and encompassing more than 100 ethnic groups.

Since 1917, Soviet forces have taken small nibbles and big gulps from Central Asia, the Caucasus, Finland, eastern Europe, and the

Baltic area. Communism, the Kremlin declared, would never recede, but would only advance. This was the public strategy, based in part on an unspoken desire for buffers against powerful rivals.

The aggregate size of the Soviet military machine and the extent of its territory tell only part of the story about the Communist superpower as it embarks on the 1990s. It may not even be the most important part.

Economic and Political Rot

The other reality of today's USSR is political rot. The German strategist Clausewitz noted long ago that physical aspects of military power—troops and weapons—"seem little more than the wooden hilt" of the sword of war, "while the moral factors are . . . the real weapon, the finely honed blade." At no time in memory has the hilt of Soviet military arms been so tenuously attached to the sword of public will.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in March 1985, he inherited a nation that could not feed itself, had suffered years of zero economic growth, and faced the pros-

Displays of the most modern Soviet fighters, like the Sukhoi Su-27 Flanker (right), at Western events such as the 38th Paris Air Show at Le Bourget symbolize the paradox of heavy modernization of Soviet political reform. The purpose and the utility of Soviet military power are coming under new international scrutiny.



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pect of being relegated to Third World status by 2000 in every realm save military power. He has preached radical restructuring of society, with particular emphasis on the economy and intellectual life.

Things aren't going very well. Democracy, as Gorbachev now knows, is messy. The move toward openness and diffusion of power has prompted minorities in Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Georgia to take to the streets. Baltic states seek national autonomy, even independence. Even full-blooded Russians are rebelling; witness the coal miner strikes this past summer.

Discontent within Warsaw Pact nations resulted in the appearance in Poland of the first non-Communist prime minister in forty-five years. Similar ferment is visible in Hungary. Stalinist hard-liners in East Germany, Romania, and Bulgaria, meanwhile, hope for a quick retreat from *perestroika*, Gorbachev's catchall name for his social and economic restructuring.

In short, the empire shows signs of crumbling. The Kremlin certainly retains the capacity to retract *perestroika* and return to business as usual. However, as matters stand, Western military experts see both dangers and opportunities in the growing turbulence that now has become the hallmark of Soviet politics.

The central criterion used by the USSR when judging the correlation of forces was provided by dictator Joseph Stalin. Hearing that the Vatican might play a useful role in defeating the Nazis, Stalin is said to have sneered: "The Pope? How many divisions does the Pope have?" Today, in Washington and Moscow and other capitals around the globe, a new twist on Stalin's formulation is being posed as the real test of whether the Cold War can come to an end: How many divisions will Gorbachev have?

Reasonable Sufficiency

Gorbachev has broken the back of Soviet Communist Party orthodoxy, shocking the world and his own generals by calling for unilateral military cutbacks and by redefining Soviet military policy. He has attempted to rewrite Soviet military doctrine with a ground-breaking theory of "reasonable sufficiency," accompanied by pledges to reduce Soviet forces and lessen the importance of military power as a tool of foreign policy.

Gorbachev first raised the banner of reasonable sufficiency during the 27th Communist Party Congress in Moscow in 1986. He declared, "We can never be secure while the United States feels insecure." Three years later, he elaborated on his planned changes in Soviet stra-

tegic posture during a landmark address to the United Nations. "It is clear today that the increase of military force does not make any single power all-powerful. A one-sided emphasis on military force, in the final analysis, weakens other elements of national security."

In principle, he seemed to say, the concept of reasonable sufficiency would set concrete levels of manpower and weapons such that neither superpower could mount a surprise attack or launch offensive operations, but which would allow both to possess adequate troops and armament to rebuff an attacker.

The underlying logic of reasonable sufficiency can be traced directly to the stagnant Soviet economy and Gorbachev's desire to bring his country to superpower status in some way other than measurements of military power.

Depending on whose figures are used, militarization continues to devour anywhere from fourteen to twenty-five percent of the USSR's annual gross national product, compared to only about six percent in the US. The Brezhnev era, now denounced as "the period of stagnation," left as its legacy a tottering technological base that even conservative Politburo members are forced to admit is unable to compete with the West in sophisticated weaponry and computers or civilian industrial and consumer goods.

The Central Intelligence Agency, in conjunction with the Defense Intelligence Agency, prepared a recent study in which top Sovietologists report that Gorbachev's plan produced poor results in its first four years, the span of a US president's first term in office. The intelligence report noted that, although Gorbachev "remains committed to his original vision of a revitalized Soviet economy, he has apparently concluded that he cannot realize this vision as rapidly as he once thought possible, nor proceed directly along the path he initially planned to follow."

In an ominous note, the agencies said Gorbachev has plotted a "midcourse correction" because of "growing popular discontent" over empty market shelves and a standard of living that refuses to improve despite the dust being kicked up by *perestroika*.



Having fought an unpopular war in Afghanistan, this young Soviet soldier may find alienation at home similar to that encountered by US veterans of Vietnam. A Supreme Soviet committee has been formed to help young veterans readjust in the face of civilian guilt and ambivalence regarding USSR's Afghan involvement.

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Warsaw Pact reactions to Soviet President Gorbachev's policies have varied. In Poland, political discontent, encouraged by the changes in the USSR, resulted in the election of Poland's first non-Communist prime minister in forty-five years. Here, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski greets the Gorbachevs at the Warsaw airport in July 1989—just before the election.

Born of economic crisis, the concept of reasonable sufficiency is, in theory, a watershed in Soviet military thought. For decades, the Soviets have felt compelled to maintain a force vast enough to mount an offensive or counteroffensive capable of sweeping Europe, to build an awesome nuclear force, to back surrogates such as Libya and Syria, and even to intervene directly, as they did in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan. If Gorbachev is to be believed, those policies no longer apply.

US Hopeful but Wary

Washington remains wary. The Bush Administration has countered Gorbachev at Vienna with the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CAFE) plan to cut NATO and Warsaw troops to equal and much-reduced levels. At the same time, President Bush and the Pentagon leadership adopted a cautious approach, applauding Gorbachev's reforms while stating that more proof of long-lasting military restructuring is required.

Nowhere is the high-level uncertainty in Washington more evident than in the tentative assessments of Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney. Initially, he predicted that Gorbachev "would ultimately fail" and would be "replaced by some-

body who will be far more hostile" to the West. Later, he softened his tone, saying there is no question that "we may—I would emphasize may—be on the verge of fundamental shifts . . . in US-Soviet relations. I think it would be fair to say that the likelihood of war between the US and Soviet Union is probably less today than at any time in the postwar period." When once again confronted with Gorbachev's peace and public-relations offensives, Cheney again altered his tone. The new view was expressed in a major speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"I wish I could stand before you and say that the Soviet strategic threat has been reduced over the past five years," Cheney said, noting that Soviet arms spending has continued to grow under Gorbachev. "But it has not. If anything, the United States is facing a more formidable offensive strategic arsenal today than before Mr. Gorbachev took power."

The negative US responses rattle military commentators in the USSR, who stress that Gorbachev remains firmly in control and who point to what they describe as historic, unilateral steps taken by Moscow to alter its strategic footing and prove that reasonable sufficiency is more than hot air.

Andrei Kokoshin, the number two analyst at Moscow's prestigious Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada, has a ready list of Gorbachev's accomplishments in curbing the Soviet military. He cites withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, support for an agreement to remove Cuban troops from Angola, abolition of the rank of marshal in peacetime, and the thin-out of forces along the Sino-Soviet border to reduce tensions with China.

However, it is the Central Front in Europe, where NATO and Warsaw Pact forces come face to face, that is the prime focus of US military strategy. Gorbachev's announcements of prospective unilateral cuts in Europe have crystallized the debate over Soviet military power.

In his United Nations address, Gorbachev promised to cut 500,000 troops from the Soviet military, almost ten percent of his men in uniform. Six tank divisions are to be withdrawn from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, Gorbachev pledged. In all, 10,000 tanks, 8,500 artillery pieces, and 800 combat aircraft will be removed from eastern Europe and Soviet territory west of the Ural Mountains, the dividing line between the European and Asian regions of the Soviet Union.

The unspoken agenda of Gorbachev's speech came through loud and clear: Once these cutbacks have been completed, the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies will no longer be able to conduct a blitzkrieg across Western Europe.

Unequal Cuts

A blemish was discovered on these attractive developments last August when a congressional panel touring East Germany was told by a Soviet general that not all elements of the six tank divisions would be withdrawn under the unilateral pullback. Important hardware, including air defense weapons, artillery, and armored personnel carriers, would remain in eastern Europe under new assignments to existing units said to be undergoing restructuring to a more defensive posture.

Startling Western Kremlin-watchers who count rubles in the Soviet defense budget, Gorbachev told a visiting delegation last January that military spending will be cut by 14.2 percent over the next two years and that a number of defense factories will be converted to production of consumer goods.

Gorbachev's promise to cut military spending also remains somewhat ambiguous. Soviet officials, including Premier Nikolai Ryzhkov and Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov,

have given breakdowns of the Soviet military budget. Senior Pentagon and intelligence officials argue that these figures do not include a full accounting of rubles spent on research and development, repairs and overhaul—or the huge sums spent to procure new weapons.

Even former Marshal of the Soviet Union Sergei Akhromeyev, the principal military advisor to Gorbachev, concedes that statistics issued by his colleagues do not tell the full story. In an unprecedented appearance before the House Armed Services Committee last summer, the bemedaled veteran of World War II and the Afghan conflict conceded that Defense Ministry officials in Moscow would be unable to tabulate military spending accurately until there is a loosening of state controls that place absurdly low, fixed prices on raw materials and finished goods.

In fact, Akhromeyev recently reported that the newly empowered Committee on Defense and Security, part of the Soviet Union's new parliament, will soon conduct the first-ever, full-scale hearings into the USSR's defense budget.

In Washington, there continues to be healthy skepticism. "We think that cuts are coming," explains Paul Wolfowitz, the Pentagon's new Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. "But I think even [Soviet leaders]



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are not so clear about what they are cutting or how far and how fast. Remember, too—the Soviets are cutting from extraordinarily high levels to begin with."

Air Force Gen. Robert Herres, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he believes the ultimate goal of Gorbachev's military reforms would be to trim the fat from a wasteful defense bureaucracy to "make their forces more capable and effective and professional." The reason, he says, is that the Kremlin's military leaders have come to understand that Soviet armed forces are a "hollow instrument" without a strong, vibrant economy to underpin them.

"If restructuring can be used to streamline their military posture," he said, "I'm sure they will try to do that. Clearly, Mr. Gorbachev is not doing anything that he does not think is in the interest of the Soviet Union."

General Herres then said that the analysts who work for the Joint Chiefs of Staff will be looking for specific signs in Gorbachev's military restructuring to prove that the Soviet leader is transforming his forces to a defensive posture. These include the reduction of bridging equipment, which would be used to cross rivers in Germany in a European offensive; cuts in spare parts, fuel, and ammunition stored in Po-



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Almost everyone agrees that Soviet force cuts will be made, but no one agrees on what that will mean. Gorbachev has promised to withdraw six tank divisions from eastern Europe, for example, but much important hardware will be reassigned to units left behind. Above, Soviet main battle tanks; top right, a MIG-29 Fulcrum.

Gorbachev first aired his theory of reasonable sufficiency during the 27th Communist Party Congress in Moscow in 1986. He discussed it further in an address to the United Nations in late 1988: "The increase of military force does not make any single power all-powerful. A one-sided emphasis on military force . . . weakens other elements of national security."



land and East Germany, vital to sustaining an offensive; and demobilization of mobile radar and air-defense units, needed to protect land forces from air attack.

Moving Back From the Brink

Despite lingering uncertainties and ambiguities, congressional leaders and civilian military analysts are redefining national security to respond adequately to Gorbachev's new military thinking.

Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, says the US must prepare for the possibility that its relationship with the USSR will someday reflect a step back from direct confrontation. "The question is how to respond to Gorbachev's initiatives, fashion a defense budget to protect against changes in the Soviet Union, and still be prepared for other things that can go wrong in the world," Aspin said.

The moderate Democrat has his own ideas of how to do this. Advocating a defense program for "this time of promise, this time of uncertainty," Aspin laid out a strategy for military spending on national defense whose "first phase makes cuts that can quickly be reversed if things in the Soviet Union take a U-turn." Initial reductions should trim readiness, operations, and maintenance spending. Only in subsequent

budgets, when American policymakers are convinced that military reform has taken hold in the USSR, should personnel and weaponry be reduced, Aspin said.

This back-from-the-brink theme is echoed by Richard Perle, the hawkish Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy during the Reagan arms buildup. He maintains that it is crucial for military planners to take advantage of the warming East-West climate to funnel more money into "generic technologies."

"We now are in a period of relative tranquility," Perle said. "We might be better advised to take risks in the short term—like cutting the standing army—in order to protect America's technological base for the turn of the century, which more likely will be a period of uncertainty."

Analyst James Blackwell of Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies calls for "a fundamental reassessment of the roles and missions" of the US military. This review, he claims, should be prompted not only by the glimmer of reduced tensions with the USSR, but by the fact that Amer-

ica's security interests will more likely be threatened in future years by terrorism, low-level violence in the Third World, and the buildup of ballistic missiles, nuclear warheads, and chemical weapons in developing countries.

Blackwell said Pentagon planners should be reviewing the need for more flexible and mobile forces to better deal with such crises as American hostages in Iran, the mining of the Persian Gulf, or keeping a cease-fire in Beirut.

Though the Soviet empire may be fraying at the edges, most strategic analysts are quick to make a critical point. So long as Moscow retains a sizable nuclear armory and a large, well-equipped conventional force—and no one believes that the Kremlin will do otherwise—the USSR will continue to rate as a military superpower and an exceptionally dangerous adversary. The Soviet Union may well be fated to remain a one-dimensional superpower, and the political utility of its military power may be on the wane, but the basic military problem that has long confronted the West isn't solved just yet, and likely won't be for some time. ■

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