

The Renaissance in American Strategy and the Ending of the Great Cold War



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PHOTO: East and West Germans converse at the newly created opening in the Berlin Wall after a crane removed a section of the structure beside the Brandenburg Gate, 21 December 1989. (DOD, SSGT F. Lee Corkran)

WHEN THE RED FLAG came down over the Kremlin on 25 December 1991, few people were aware just how great a contribution NATO had made to ending the Cold War. NATO's 60th anniversary is a particularly good time to look back and try to understand what really happened. Thanks to material that has become available since the end of the Cold War—from once-secret archives, memoirs, and interviews—we can now see far more clearly what NATO and the Warsaw Pact were trying to do.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the spectre of a nuclear war haunted the Cold War adversaries. During the last two decades of the period, they put enormous effort into trying to ensure that if a war did break out in Europe, for whatever reason, it would not go nuclear. This honorable intention sparked the greatest renaissance of military thinking in the 20th century. High-quality intelligence, in both senses of the word, shaped the actions of the two sides, and each was often quick to adopt the innovations of the other.

The rivalry between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was not only intense and dramatic, but absorbed a huge amount of the energy of their military commanders and political leaders. As Diego Ruiz-Palmer, one of the most astute observers of this era, remarked, “No other war has been so thoroughly planned and well prepared, yet never fought.”¹ This, however, was not simply a military affair. Both sides were engaged in what was, in effect, a psychological struggle for the “mastery of Europe.” Not surprisingly, relations were at times fraught with tension and the stakes exceptionally high.

Preventing Nuclear War

In many respects, the story begins in 1967 when NATO made it clear that it not only wished to see détente in Europe, but was also changing its strategy. In the event of a conventional Soviet attack, it would not immediately unleash a “massive retaliation” with tactical nuclear weapons, but instead pursue a policy of “flexible response.”² This eased one of Moscow's deepest fears—that the outbreak of any conflict in Europe would automatically result in NATO using nuclear weapons and that, in turn, would almost certainly unleash a global nuclear war.

“No other war has been so thoroughly planned and well prepared, yet never fought.”

—Diego Ruiz-Palmer

Moscow quickly signalled that it was taking NATO’s new strategy seriously. Its Dnieper military exercise in February 1968 began with Soviet forces fighting for a week before resorting to the use of nuclear weapons—this was a first. Preventing NATO from using its some 7,000 nuclear weapons posed a major challenge for the Warsaw Pact. Under NATO’s new strategy of “flexible response,” its armies would try to hold the frontline close to the Inner-German Border, while its aircraft, which accounted for half of NATO’s conventional firepower, remorselessly pounded the attackers.

Over the next few years, while the United States became bogged down in Vietnam and NATO was in a lamentable state, the Soviet Union rapidly increased the firepower and mobility of Warsaw Pact forces in Central Europe. The Soviet air forces in the forward areas, meanwhile, began to acquire large numbers of new aircraft—some designed to provide close support for ground troops, others to pin down NATO aircraft at their bases and destroy their nuclear storage and other military sites. In 1974, Marshal Viktor Kulikov, the chief of the General Staff, announced with satisfaction that Soviet forces were now “abreast of contemporary requirements.”³

That same year, with the Vietnam War now over, the renaissance in American thinking about strategy in Europe got underway. James Schlesinger, the then-recently appointed Secretary of Defense, set out to revitalize the alliance. Schlesinger worked closely with General Alexander Haig, the new supreme allied commander in Europe, and Andrew Marshall, one of RAND’s wisest and most creative thinkers, whom he had brought into the Pentagon to head the new Office of Net Assessment.

Marshall was tasked with coming up with imaginative suggestions on how to strengthen NATO and put the Soviets on the defensive. He invested heavily in research by consultants, scholars, and the military themselves. Before long, Marshall was helping to forge new ideas into an intellectual

offensive that focused on how NATO could win with conventional weapons.

Given the likely scale of the Soviet offensive, NATO had to win the initial battle. “From the beginning,” Marshall said, “we knew that would require new weapons, but I also firmly believed they could only be effective if combined with a new doctrine, based on a careful study of how Soviet forces would fight.”⁴

“We began to look more closely than others had previously done at the way Soviet forces did things, and why they did them that way,” Marshall explained. “We not only monitored exercises, but studied training manuals and models or matrixes that the general staff used to assess the balance of forces. It was clear that Soviet commanders feared that if subordinates were not pushed, there would be inertia. The battle plans, therefore, had to be built around creating mass and momentum. To facilitate this, they relied heavily on standardized procedures.”⁵ NATO would have to exploit the weaknesses inherent in such a regimented approach to warfare to win the initial battle.

General David Jones, the commander of the American Air Force in Europe, was quick to realize that he now needed to concentrate on breaking up Soviet forces close to the front line, not just the reinforcements moving up from the rear. This would require the Air Force to work more closely with the Army.

In 1975, the Air Force opened its “Red Flag” training school in Nevada. With the help of a Soviet pilot who had defected with the latest Soviet interceptor and Israelis who had fought both Soviet and Soviet-trained pilots over the Middle East, a mini-Soviet air force was established with Soviet aircraft captured by the Israelis.⁶

Within a few years, the Army had a similar institution in the desert of California, where a “Red Division,” equipped with captured and replica Soviet tanks, fought like Russians. American units that

“...we knew that would require new weapons, but...they could only be effective if combined with a new doctrine...”

—Andrew Marshall

trained against them always lost. They were relieved to learn that Reds won in large part because they had fought more battles together than had any of the teams that took them on. Practice made perfect.

General William DePuy, who headed the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command, took this work further by revolutionizing tactics and training further in 1976 which effected the biggest change in U.S. Army doctrine since World War II. Instead of confronting Soviet forces in Europe with well-prepared static defense, the army would henceforth pursue "active defense," which meant that they could counterattack with ground troops well beyond their own front line.⁷

At this time, some old German officers explained first to the British, then to the Americans, that during World War II, they had treated the whole Eastern Front as one huge theater of military operations.⁸ This was the only region in which their army and their air force had worked closely together. The British and the Americans began to ponder how NATO could exploit this idea.

A Revolution in Military Affairs

In parallel with this new thinking about how to fight the Russians, a technological revolution was also taking place in military affairs.

One of the first ground breaking studies commissioned by Marshall was *The Comparison of Soviet and U.S. Weapons*. The study showed that new Soviet equipment was as good as or better than that which the Americans were producing except—and this was a big exception—in the field of electronics.⁹ The message was clear. NATO could only regain the advantage by exploiting advanced technology.

At this time, in 1974, the Defense Nuclear Agency and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency sponsored a study that showed that the revolution taking place in the accuracy of weapons would soon make it possible to use conventional substitutes for nuclear weapons. Within a year, work had started on a completely new range of heat-seeking and terminally guided weapons that were together called "assault-breaker." At Marshall's urging, the Defense Intelligence Agency began to work out how these weapons might be used to best effect.¹⁰

A "revolution in military affairs" was underway, and Moscow knew it. On 14 December 1975, Yuri

Andropov, the head of the KGB, warned the Soviet Politburo that such new weapons could dramatically increase NATO's ability to thwart any Soviet conventional attack.¹¹

This created a serious problem because, by the early 1970s, Soviet leaders had lost their faith in the utility of nuclear weapons. According to Vitaly Tsygichko, a scientific analyst working in the Ministry of Defense, top Soviet generals "understood and believed that the use of [tactical] nuclear weapons by either side would be catastrophic."¹² By 1975, and probably earlier, the Soviet General Staff had already received an "instruction" from the leadership that Soviet forces were never to be the first to use nuclear weapons. There was now even greater pressure on the Soviet military to be able to overwhelm NATO with conventional forces before it could "go nuclear."¹³

Ogarkov's Response

Moscow had a surprise in store for NATO. In 1975, the Soviet Union began testing its new SS-20 mobile missile, which had three MIRV warheads. According to General Andrian Danilevich, this "was a breakthrough, unlike anything the Americans had. We were immediately able to hold all of Europe hostage."¹⁴ This was no exaggeration: the SS-20 could attack targets anywhere in Europe from deep within Soviet territory; some 400 of them would be deployed over the next few years.

As this new nuclear "umbrella" was being put in place, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the new chief of the General Staff, was tasked with developing a credible strategy for defeating NATO with conventional forces alone, which could transform the psychological balance of power in Europe by making the West Europeans doubt that the United States would be able to protect them.

General Danilevich, probably the most talented Soviet strategist of the Cold War era, did the bulk of the work. The results were later encapsulated into a three-volume, top secret "directive" on *The Strategy of Deep Operations (Global and Theater)* that would guide Soviet military operations in time of war. The key innovation was the concept of fighting an integrated air and land battle over a vastly greater area than ever before.

A few people in Washington soon had a good idea of this new strategy, thanks mainly to Colonel



Last Army ID of Colonel Ryszard Kukliński.

Ryszard Kukliński, a Polish officer working on the war plans of the Warsaw Pact, and a CIA agent. The scale of Ogarkov’s vision stunned those who saw Kukliński’s intelligence. It gave them a sense of shock and awe long before that term entered common parlance.

The central concept was a high-speed offensive launched from under the cover of military exercises in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Simultaneously, 2,000 aircraft would attack all of NATO’s nuclear weapons facilities and seek to pin down NATO aircraft for 48 hours. This latter task was gaining importance because NATO aircraft were soon expected to be carrying “assault breaker” munitions that would be far more effective than conventional bombs against Soviet armored forces. Meanwhile, a massive offensive, involving two million troops, would begin along a front stretching from northern Norway to eastern Turkey.

To suppress NATO defenses, strengthened with nearly 50,000 modern antitank guided missiles, Soviet forces would subject them to an unprecedented artillery and aerial bombardment. The term for it in Russian suggested that it would be of nuclear intensity.

“This new strategy aimed to give the Soviet Union more options than NATO,” Phillip Petersen, one of the leading experts on Soviet strategy in the Defense Intelligence Agency, later observed. “Ogarkov,” he said, “knew that many in NATO doubted that their political leaders would agree quickly to use nuclear weapons. A key aim, therefore, was to fight the war in such a way as to delay NATO taking the decision

to use nuclear weapons until it was too late for them to be able to influence the outcome of the war.”¹⁵

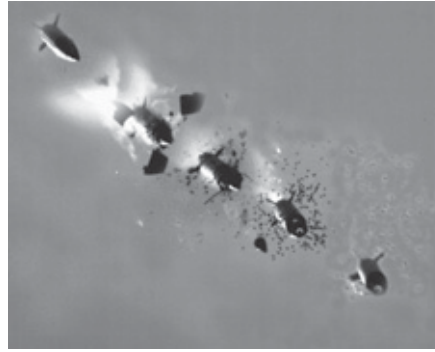
Testing Ogarkov’s Strategy

In September 1981, on the plains of the western Soviet Union, General Ogarkov gave NATO a glimpse of his new strategy in Zapad-’81, probably the largest armored Soviet military exercise since 1945. “We monitored this exercise intently,” recalled Diego Ruiz-Palmer, who worked with Andy Marshall at the time. “Ogarkov,” he pointed out, “showed that over the past three years he had studied closely the ways in which the Americans’ ‘assault breaker’ would work and what action could be taken to minimize their impact.”¹⁶

A key element in Ogarkov’s strategy was the new fast moving armored “operational maneuver groups,” or OMGs.¹⁷ Mobile artillery and engineers with river-crossing equipment accompanied them to facilitate their advance, with fighter-bombers



How forces in East Germany and Czechoslovakia planned to encircle NATO Forces.



One of the new “assault-breaker” weapons makes its mark.

and attack helicopters providing added firepower. To reduce their vulnerability, they could spread themselves thinly until they were about to attack, while at the same time being accompanied by large numbers of mobile surface-to-air missiles to protect them from NATO air attacks.

The main task of these OMGs was to penetrate deep into West Germany to disrupt the command and control of NATO forces and to seize the remaining nuclear stores, airfields, and key logistic points. Special Forces airlifted behind NATO lines would help them in these tasks. Other OMGs would encircle the main NATO units, but do so much faster than Soviet forces could have done in the seventies. The intent was for Soviet forces to reach the Channel in less than 20 days—and without using nuclear weapons.

Compared with NATO, Soviet conventional forces had never looked so good, especially in the carefully edited Soviet propaganda film that followed. Publicly, Soviet leaders began proclaiming that they had perfected the structure and methods of their forces to the point where they could win a European war with conventional weapons alone.

Much needed to be done, however, before the Soviet forces could realize Ogarkov’s concept in full. “Experienced observers knew,” Ruiz-Palmer points out, “that every part of these maneuvers had been carefully rehearsed and choreographed. Nearly all those taking part were officers and NCOs, not ordinary soldiers. This was not how it would be in a military operation; it was military propaganda at its best.”¹⁸

The Initial American Response

However, NATO was not willing to let the matter rest. At the close of 1981, just three months after Zapad-81, General Bernard Rogers, the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe of the day, received a

personal and top-secret briefing at his headquarters at Mons in Belgium. His briefers were the two DIA analysts who were most knowledgeable about Ogarkov’s plans. When they had finished, Rogers reportedly told them, “For the first time in my career, I really feel that I am getting inside the mind of my adversary.”¹⁹ General Rogers was quick to realize that NATO had much to learn from Ogarkov.

While NATO was getting its act together, Ogarkov’s was running into trouble. At almost the same time that General Rogers received his briefing, Marshal Dmitri Ustinov, the Soviet minister of defense, was telling his Warsaw Pact colleagues that the balance of power between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was “at the moment not in our favor.”²⁰ His statement reflected a sudden and marked decline in Soviet confidence.

One major factor certainly was the rise of the Solidarity Movement, led by Lech Walesa, in Poland. Even after the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981, Poland could not be considered a reliable ally. And to make matters worse, when Moscow learned that Kuklinski had defected to the Americans, Ogarkov had to face the unpleasant fact that his new war plans were no longer secret.

Transforming the Battle

Marshal Ustinov’s change of outlook is also likely to have stemmed from a full assessment of the

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—General Bernard Rogers, 1981

new “revolution in military affairs”—a revolution in which the Americans were pushing the competition beyond Soviet reach—from electronics into the realm of micro-electronics.²¹

Soviet military intelligence would not have had great difficulty in obtaining copies of brochures that American defense contractors were using to persuade the military that the second generation of “assault-breaker” weapons would be far more effective than the first.

These brochures, which contained a lot of hype, drew heavily on a film produced in 1979 that showed aircraft dropping “bomblets” whose heat-seeking sensors enabled them to home-in on tanks with devastating effect. The film, however, was a cleverly edited version of the first test of the new weapons a year earlier. Each of the “bomblets” was hand-made and had cost a fortune. They were strung on wires across a canyon directly above lines of tanks that were not moving. But they did work. And Soviet military intelligence probably also knew that the Americans were testing helicopters that could identify moving objects up to 40 kilometers (km) behind the front line.²²

In addition, within two years they expected the Americans to bring into service cruise missiles with a range of 2,500 km that could destroy hardened targets which were previously only vulnerable to a nuclear attack. This would expose the whole territory of the Warsaw Pact to a speedy conventional attack from the outbreak of hostilities.

While Soviet military intelligence seems to have grossly overestimated the pace at which NATO would deploy the new “assault-breaker” munitions, it was not a bad error to make—its main message was that the Soviet Union faced a challenge that it could not match.

By the end of 1982, Marshal Ustinov was referring rather coyly to “unsolved problems and difficulties” in the development of the Soviet economy.²³ There was now little prospect of Ogarkov acquiring the extremely costly weapons he needed if he was going to win—the accurate missiles with conventional warheads that could close NATO airfields and destroy its nuclear facilities and the high-performance aircraft that would give the Soviets air superiority from the outset of the war.

Three months later, President Reagan jabbed a very raw Soviet nerve. On 23 March 1983,

he launched his Strategic Defense Initiative (more popularly known as “Star Wars”). He called on scientists to render nuclear missiles “impotent and obsolete” by developing an impenetrable network of ground and space-based systems that could destroy missiles in flight.²⁴ Many in the United States were skeptical about the feasibility of this initiative, but Soviet leaders feared it might succeed. They were really shaken by the strategic implications of the arms race moving into space.

Shortly after Reagan’s announcement, a telling insight into Soviet weakness arose during a conversation Marshal Ogarkov had with a former American arms controller. Ogarkov told the American, “In America, small children play with computers. . . . For reasons you know well, we cannot make computers widely available in our society. We will never catch up with you in modern arms, until we have an economic revolution. And the question is whether we can have an economic revolution without a political revolution.”²⁵

Worse was yet to come. In September 1983, Soviet air defense forces shot down a South Korean airliner that had strayed into Soviet airspace. Moscow’s strident defense of its action reduced the considerable opposition in Europe to NATO deploying Pershing II and cruise missiles to counterbalance the Soviet SS-20s. This was very bad news for Moscow as the Soviets feared that the Pershing IIs could reach Moscow in less than 10 minutes, which would not give the Soviet leadership time to retaliate; similarly, Soviet radar would have considerable



White House photo

President Ronald Reagan addresses the Nation from the Oval Office on National Security (Strategic Defense Initiative) speech, 23 March 1983.

difficulty detecting the terrain-hugging cruise missiles. The first missiles arrived in Western Europe in November 1983.²⁶

At the operational level NATO was beginning to turn the tables on the Soviets. By the early 1980s, the U.S. Army in Europe had moved from the doctrine of “active defense” to that of the “air-land battle,” which involved the close coordination of ground and air forces. Meanwhile, General Nigel Bagnall, a distinguished military historian, returned to Germany to command the British Corps. Bagnall firmly believed that the weak could defeat the strong and he devoted much time to showing those under his command how this could be done.²⁷

In his efforts to find a way to thwart a Soviet offensive, Bagnall received highly valuable help from an unexpected quarter. Colonel Ghulam Dastagir Wardak had studied at the Voroshilov General Staff Academy in Moscow in the mid-1970s, where he had secretly taken detailed lecture notes in an obscure Afghan script. After the Soviet invasion of his country, Colonel Wardak came into contact with the Americans in Pakistan. His notes were of great value to NATO, but most important, Wardak had been trained as a Soviet officer, thought like a Soviet officer, and fought like one.

In 1983, General Bagnall invited Wardak to command a full Soviet army in a war game that he was holding at his headquarters.²⁸ To British amazement, Wardak immediately threw a full division in an almost suicidal attack on their heavily defended front line. The British responded by committing their reserves. While they were pinned down, other divisions under Wardak’s command swept through the weaker Belgian forces to the south and those of the Dutch to the north, thereby not only encircling the whole of the British force, but that of the Germans as well.

For Bagnall, the pain of seeing his commanders humiliated by an Afghan on the plains of Germany was more than offset by the new insight that he had gained into Soviet thinking. Indeed, this experience reinforced Bagnall’s conviction that to defeat a highly coordinated Soviet offensive, NATO not only needed a well-coordinated defense, but also the ability to launch powerful counteroffensives.²⁹ On taking command of the Northern Army Group in 1983, Bagnall worked closely with similarly minded senior German and French officers to develop a highly innovative and flexible approach to thwarting a Soviet offensive.

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NATO’s self-confidence continued to grow as the Americans showed that in just 10 days they would be able to fly in five extra divisions to join up with their equipment which would be waiting and ready for them in Europe.³⁰ This represented a formidable addition to NATO’s capability.

The Turning Point—1985

On becoming the Soviet leader in March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev pushed forward the fresh approach to East-West relations that he had first signaled during his famous talks with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in London in December 1984. He wanted, he said, to see both sides’ nuclear and conventional arsenals sharply pruned back.

Within the Politburo, there was growing awareness of the country’s economic problems. As Marshal Akhromeyev later put it, “The Soviet Union could not continue the confrontation with the United States and NATO after 1985. The economic resources for such a policy had been practically exhausted.”³¹

This was one reason why Gorbachev had been delighted. Shortly before his death in December 1984, Marshal Ustinov, the minister of defense, had demoted Marshal Ogarkov. Gorbachev detested Marshal Ogarkov, mainly for wanting to pour even more money into revamping Soviet conventional forces in readiness for a war that Gorbachev was determined they would never fight.³²

In Western capitals, however, there was considerable suspicion over Gorbachev’s real intentions. NATO pressed ahead with its plans to strengthen the alliance. One of the great enhancements came about in 1985, when NATO adopted the doctrine of follow-on forces attack.³³ For the first time, the supreme allied commander, Europe, could coordinate conventional attacks across East Germany and deep into Poland.

The transformation that had taken place in NATO’s Northern Army Group had greatly increased the ability to mount such attacks. Since Bagnall had

taken command of it in 1983, the British, Dutch, Belgian, German and American forces in the group had trained to fight as one army that could exploit its superior flexibility, concentration of force, and ability to surprise. Bagnall kept telling his commanders not to follow his orders, but to use their initiative.³⁴

Follow-on forces attack and Bagnall's approach to fighting the Soviets were both closely tied to the gathering momentum of NATO's "revolution in military affairs." This provided an intellectual framework to adapt the latest American technology to the realities of the European battlefield. The key task was to break the offensive by Soviet armored forces and close down the airfields from which air support originated.

One NATO aircraft could destroy up to 100 more targets with the new types of "assault breaker" weapons than with previous conventional munitions. Even so, efficient targeting remained essential as the initial Warsaw Pact attack alone could involve up to 40,000 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery systems.

Ted Warner, a defense expert who rose later to be assistant secretary of defense for strategy, emphasized, "One of the greatest innovations was what we called the 'recce-strike.'"³⁵ NATO was now developing a surveillance aircraft, the J-STAR, which could identify targets on the ground up to 250 kms away. Once the J-Star or other aircraft had identified a target, high-powered computers could then locate aircraft already in the air that had the right munitions and were near the target and then flash them the coordinates for the attack.

For the first time, the Americans were moving toward gaining the upper hand—not in defense, but in attack.

Keeping Up the Pressure

At the Reykjavik summit in November 1986, Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev had similar views on the need for deep arms cuts in nuclear missiles. Deadlock ensued, however, when Reagan would not agree to link the cuts to tight restrictions on developing weaponry for the Strategic Defense Initiative, or "Star Wars," as it was more widely known.

Despite this setback, Gorbachev still felt the need to find a way forward.³⁶ In early 1987, he decided to break the ice and agreed to the negotiation of a separate treaty on intermediate-range nuclear forces

without any preconditions about restraints on the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Gorbachev's willingness to eliminate the SS-20 missiles symbolized his rejection of Ogarkov's strategy. After all, the SS-20 had made Ogarkov's strategy possible in the first place, and then threatened Soviet security by provoking NATO to deploy Pershing II and cruise missiles.

On 28 May 1987, Mathias Rust, a 19-year-old West German, flew a Cessna light aircraft 1,000 kilometers across the Soviet Union and landed it right in Red Square, close to Gorbachev's office in the Kremlin—without anyone trying to stop him. That same day, at their meeting in East Berlin, the leaders of the Warsaw Pact called for reductions in conventional armed forces and armaments to a level that would preclude surprise attacks and "offensive operations in general."³⁷ Gorbachev quickly took advantage of the Rust incident to sack the minister of defense and many senior officers, thus making it easier for him to push forward the reform of Soviet strategy in Europe.

Despite these signs of flexibility from Moscow, General Rogers set out in the autumn of 1987 to undermine Soviet confidence by staging the largest and most innovative exercises that NATO had ever held. In northern Germany, General Bagnall's concept of using large armored reserves to launch a counterblow against a Soviet breakthrough was tested in exercise Certain Strike, which involved nearly 80,000 men, 35,000 flown in from the United States.³⁸ For the first time, all of these forces, from five different countries, were under the commander of NATO's Northern Army Group, not their respective national commanders.

France contributed 20,000 troops to a similar exercise in southern Germany, called Bold Sparrow. This was the largest-ever French contingent to deploy to Germany in support of NATO—and it was the first time that France's new *Force d'Action Rapide* had crossed the Rhine.

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Following the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty at the Washington Summit in December 1987, there was considerable euphoria in the West. Not only were many people claiming that the Cold War was virtually over, but a growing number of politicians were calling for a “peace dividend” based on immediate, unilateral cuts in Western defense expenditure, with the savings redirected to deal with urgent economic and social issues.³⁹

This prospect alarmed several Western leaders and their military advisers, who pointed out that the Warsaw Pact buildup was continuing and the Warsaw Pact had a massive preponderance of conventional forces in Europe. Terminating NATO’s own long-planned buildup, in which it had invested a huge amount of money and political capital, would leave the alliance at a grave disadvantage if the Soviet Union rejected Gorbachev’s approach and relations became confrontational once more. NATO was also keen to see deep cuts in Soviet forces in Eastern Europe so that these countries would have a better chance of regaining their freedom.

Checkmate

With military expenditure continuing to rise, Gorbachev told his colleagues in February 1988, “It’s clear now that without substantially cutting military expenditures, we cannot solve the problems of perestroika.”⁴⁰ The crucial question that Gorbachev had to address urgently was how big he wanted the cuts to be—and whether he thought the military would accept them.

Within months of Bold Sparrow, secret Soviet military journals ran articles warning that new technology was threatening tanks with obsolescence. The Soviet minister of defense, Marshal Dmitri Yazov, compounded the depression of his colleagues when he lamented that the West had developed electronic warfare capabilities that the Soviet Union simply could not match. This was probably a reference to reports from an American agent, working for both the East Germans and the Soviets, that the United States could now insert false messages into the Warsaw Pact communications networks—which could have disastrous consequences in time of war.

In the spring of 1988, the Warsaw Pact staged its first large-scale exercise that was purely defensive,

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followed by a limited three-week counteroffensive that halted after NATO forces had been expelled from Eastern Europe. “This period,” Marshal Akhromeyev said, “would have provided leaders on both sides with ample time to terminate the war.”⁴¹

Shortly after taking command of all NATO forces on the central front, General Hans-Henning von Sandrart issued the first “Operational Guidance for the Central Region.”⁴² This document pulled together the main elements of the new, dynamic strategy. NATO once again drove home the message about its growing prowess. That autumn NATO conducted Reforger 88, the biggest single exercise it had ever held, involving over 120,000 men. In this exercise, NATO tested both its new ideas and equipment.

NATO leaders felt they had finally gained the upper hand. They had admired Ogarkov for thinking big and coordinating his operations across a huge theater of military operations; now they had shown that they could not only respond in a similar way, but had the ability to defeat forces much larger than their own. As Diego Ruiz-Palmer once graphically put it, “In military terms, this was the public execution of Marshal Ogarkov outside NATO headquarters.”⁴³

Wanting Rapid Progress

Although work was progressing well on the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, it was clear that the Senate would not be willing to ratify the treaty until major cuts had been agreed on conventional forces in Europe, negotiations on which were to resume in Vienna in March 1989. Gorbachev did not object to this because as part of his efforts to build a new relationship with Western Europe, he also wanted such an accord. Just as important, deep cuts in conventional forces would free up more resources for the Soviet economy than cuts in strategic nuclear missiles would.⁴⁴

In his historic address at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946, Winston Churchill spoke of the Iron Curtain that had cut Europe in half. When Gorbachev gave his first speech to the United Nations, in December 1988, he wanted to show that he was now lifting that curtain.

In his speech, Gorbachev first emphasized the importance of the global interests of humanity, then went on to make the dramatic announcement that, over the next two years, Soviet forces would be cut by 500,000 men, and six of its armored divisions in Eastern Europe would be disbanded.⁴⁵ Moscow, he assured his listeners, was not going to use force against Eastern Europe or anywhere. Gorbachev received a standing ovation.

As Anatoly Chernayev, his foreign affairs adviser, later told me, “Gorbachev wanted to cause a sensation—and he did.” He also caught the American establishment off-guard, though Secretary of State Shultz later recalled feeling that “if anybody declared the end of the Cold War, [Gorbachev] did in that speech: It was over.”⁴⁶

Few Western leaders went so far as Shultz, publicly or privately, but most accepted that Gorbachev was moving briskly in addressing some of the remaining contentious issues of the Cold War. The large, unilateral cuts he had announced in Soviet conventional forces would put NATO and the Warsaw Pact on an equal footing.

The immediate gain was that when the negotiations reducing conventional forces in Europe resumed in Vienna in March 1989, there was now

hope of a real breakthrough. For the first time, the Soviet Union was likely to table credible figures on the number of its troops and the equipment it would have in Europe once the announced unilateral cuts had been implemented. That would provide a realistic basis on which the two sides could discuss deep and rapid cuts.

Within a year, the Berlin Wall came down, and the long-dreamed-for unification of Germany soon became a reality. When the treaty on conventional forces was signed in Paris on 19 November 1990, Soviet Minister of Defense Marshal Yazov could not contain his fury. He ranted to his colleagues, “This treaty means we have lost World War III without a shot being fired.”⁴⁷ Gorbachev’s critics were gaining popular support and in just over a year, he would be gone.

Although there is no doubt in my mind that Gorbachev wanted to cut nuclear and conventional forces, I do not believe that they would ever have been so deep or come so quickly had NATO not pursued the well-thought-out strategy that I have just outlined. Moreover, NATO’s strategy, I submit, made a crucial contribution towards unifying Germany, freeing Eastern Europe, and ending the Cold War.

Reflecting on the Cold War after it was over, a senior Soviet military intelligence officer said, “The Americans beat us not because they had more tanks, but because they had more think tanks.”⁴⁸ There was more to it than that, but he was right to underline the power of careful thought, especially in matters of strategy. **MR**

NOTES

1. Gordon S. Barass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 193

2. NATO Ministerial Communiqué, 14 December 1967.

3. Barass, 429.

4. *Ibid.*, 198.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 268.

7. *Ibid.*, 198; U.S. Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976).

8. *Ibid.*, 267-268.

9. *Ibid.*, 198-199.

10. *Ibid.*, 199.

11. *Ibid.*, 195.

12. *Ibid.*, 208.

13. *Ibid.*, 212-213.

14. *Ibid.*, 213-214.

15. *Ibid.*, 216.

16. *Ibid.*, 215.

17. *Ibid.*, 216.

18. *Ibid.*, 267.

19. *Ibid.*, 273-274.

20. *Ibid.*, 274.

21. *Ibid.*, 274-275.

22. *Ibid.*, 276.

23. *Ibid.*, 292-293.

24. *Ibid.*, 293.

25. *Ibid.*, 302.

26. *Ibid.*, 270.

27. *Ibid.*, 270-2.

28. *Ibid.*, 272.

29. *Ibid.*, 339.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 273.

34. *Ibid.*, 338.

35. *Ibid.*, 339.

36. *Ibid.*, 328.

37. *Ibid.*, 342.

38. *Ibid.*, 339.

39. *Ibid.*, 342.

40. *Ibid.*, 343.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 341.

43. *Ibid.*, ...

44. *Ibid.*, 342.

45. *Ibid.*, 347.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, 365.

48. *Ibid.*, 410.