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Soviet Reaction to the U.S. Maritime Strategy

James T. Westwood

The question of the Soviet Union's reaction to the U.S. Maritime Strategy is an intriguing one. Divining how the Soviets view that strategy and how they prepare themselves to respond to it, both in peace and in war, should be an important component of the Maritime Strategy itself. If for no other reason, this question is important because of the oft-voiced proposition that, given nominal equivalency in military firepower, the superior strategy usually wins—superiority in war has its roots in the quality and scope of military thought. Military thought, therefore, can be considered to start with military strategy, from which, logically, all else in the way of hardware, doctrine, and training flows. For example, nowadays, the U.S. Navy rationalizes hardware acquisition programs in accordance with the contributions that the end products are expected to make to the implementation of the Maritime Strategy.¹

The current Soviet 12th Five-Year Plan and the future 13th Five-Year Plan (1991-1995) are, and will be, a ten-year duet intended to revitalize the U.S.S.R.'s national economy through a pervasive restructuring in order to achieve, among other things, technological parity with the West. To accomplish the ambitious and risky national goals of this period, the new Soviet leaders have found it imperative to make important changes in all sectors of their national economy. They are mortgaging the present against payoffs for the future, buying time at the price of avoiding war with the West through 1995. After that, they count on being in a much improved economic and technological position.

From the standpoint of warfare, the most significant Soviet economic trade-off, designed to guarantee a more promising future, is in the structure of the military budget. It can be divided into three major components: operations and maintenance; acquisition; and research, development, test, and evaluation. The Soviets have restructured their military budgets for the years 1986 through 1995 to sharply reduce operations and maintenance

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expenditures below those of previous plans; to flatten previous growth in acquisition expenditures (perhaps even to cut such expenditures); and for 10 years to put the savings into research, development, test, and evaluation with a view to having a more modern and improved military capability after 1995.² Given the wealth of Soviet publications on this subject and their behavior over the last three years—since the new 12th Five-Year Plan was redrafted by order of General Secretary Gorbachev—there can be little doubt that expenditures on the Soviet armed forces are undergoing profound change with a consequent manifestation in Soviet military conduct.

To establish a link between economic causes and behavioral effects, one can see not only noticeable slowdowns in Soviet warship construction and deliveries, but also, since 1986, sharp limits in annual naval training both in geographical scope and in ship-days at sea.³ It is plain that the Soviets are aware of the U.S. Maritime Strategy, but this awareness is limited to the Soviet Union's own long-existing maritime strategy which is concerned mainly with its own sea and continental lines of communication, binding together the various contiguous Soviet maritime theaters of military operations.

If, as it appears, the Soviet Navy's training and exercise activities are tightly bound by rigid economizing on operations and maintenance through 1990 (and probably through 1995), then it may be useful to think again about Soviet naval training behavior in 1986-1988. In the U.S. Navy Department's *Report to the Congress* (the posture statement) for fiscal year 1988, it is stated that out-of-area activity of Soviet submarines (other than SSBNs) and surface ships "has dropped markedly" and that "Major fleet exercises in 1986 departed from previous trends and were waged much closer to home under the umbrella of land-based aviation. Overall, the Soviet Navy has continued to operate and train but activities have switched dramatically to their home waters. The net strategic result appears . . . to be a Soviet fleet positioning and training to counter the maritime strategy."⁴

There may be a more accurate explanation for the phenomena observed. Western press reports early in 1987 mentioned a cut in Soviet naval training and deployments throughout 1986 and 1987—the first two years of the U.S.S.R.'s revised 12th Five-Year Plan.⁵ The commander in chief of the Soviet Navy, the commander of the Soviet Northern Fleet, and other Soviets have used their press since January 1986 to explain this condition. Those commanders refer not a cautious response to the U.S. Maritime Strategy, but to the cutback in resources for procuring, operating, and maintaining the Soviet Fleet. The commanders speak of new economic effectiveness measures for evaluating naval training, of new constraints on technical resources for operations, of limiting the number of submarine training events to correspond with otherwise combined-arms exercises, and of cutting back flag officers' time at sea to only those periods when their time at sea can

be expected to have the maximum effect on the greatest number of ships and subordinate commanders.⁶ These articles by officers followed an unusual spate of articles in 1985 (appearing *after* the first Central Committee Plenum under Gorbachev) advocating restrictions on, and better, more economical planning for, all military training with a view to living within what, from 1 January 1986, would be a curtailed military operations and maintenance budget.

Among other things, those authors emphasize the need to improve the fleet's proficiency in, and familiarity with, *existing* hardware, systems, and already approved tactics. Other Soviet military writers, speaking about the entire Soviet armed forces, suggest that this five-year plan theme of training for proficiency rather than, as in past plans, for a certain kind of strategic mission, has been chosen because new service hardware will not be forthcoming in the quantity formerly taken for granted. Additionally, Admiral of the Fleet of the U.S.S.R., N.V. Chernavin, has stated specifically that because of funding constraints, Soviet naval training from 1986 through 1990 will be limited to an "operational-tactical" geography which, in Soviet military lexicography, means a range less than 500 kilometers from home ports.⁷ Thus, it is the national economic trade-offs under a new political and economic regime, rather than the threat of the U.S. Maritime Strategy, that accounts for the downturn and drawback apparent in Soviet naval activity over the last three years.

Are the Soviets ignoring the U.S. Maritime Strategy? They are not. As they have contemplated their own naval strategy extensively over many years, so now they contemplate that of the United States, mostly because the United States recently announced openly that it has a naval strategy, the outlines of which it is willing to publicize.

This U.S. willingness to be explicit about its naval intentions in the event of war with the Soviet Union causes Soviet naval authorities to characterize the U.S. Maritime Strategy as aggressive and bombastic, contrasting it to their own naval strategy which they characterize as defensive and restrained. The Soviets first began to analyze the U.S. Maritime Strategy in 1983, tracing its origin to 1978, the year in which the U.S. Navy's Seaplan 2000 was presented to Congress and the American public.

Soviet analysis of the Maritime Strategy takes particular note of numerous forward-located U.S. naval bases and of American access to foreign ports which together enable the U.S. Navy to operate closer to the U.S.S.R. than it otherwise would have been able to do. The growing U.S. reliance on sea-launched cruise missiles—the Tomahawk—is of special concern to Soviet naval planners.⁸ They mention it frequently.

Additionally, the Soviets adduce that the U.S. Maritime Strategy contains a provision for blockading Soviet naval bases to prevent Soviet ships from putting to sea in time of war, presumably to attack U.S. sea lines of

communications. The Soviets note that the U.S. Maritime Strategy relies on the active cooperation and participation of its allies, particularly Norway and Japan, owing to the favorable locations of those two countries relative to the bases and sea theaters of the Soviet Northern and Pacific Fleets. This provision alone obliges the Soviets to carve out a specific counterstrategy for neutralizing Norway and Japan in time of war and for putting the naval and air bases of the two countries to Soviet use.⁹

In addition to surface, air, and submarine-launched Tomahawk attacks, the Soviets expect that aircraft carrier task forces, consisting of three to four carrier battle groups each, will operate inside the Soviet sea theaters. Moreover, they believe that U.S. sea-launched ballistic missiles will be fired against targets outside the U.S.S.R.¹⁰ For the Soviets, the prospect of U.S. carrier battle groups and SSBNs so used constitutes theater nuclear warfare. In light of this, they reckon on providing, by the end of 1995, a greatly revised theater-wide integrated air defense network of systems able to defend against aircraft, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, irrespective of the source of the attack, afloat or ashore. The Soviets are now building this air defense meta-system which is intended particularly to frustrate U.S. and NATO suppression of enemy air defense operations.

In essence, this appraisal of the U.S. Maritime Strategy implies that the Soviet Union believes that it has no firm prospect of fighting a conventional-only war with the United States. While they have some hope of limiting nuclear strikes to the theaters outside of the U.S.S.R., the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies understand that the national territories of the Eastern European allies lie within those external theaters and are subject therefore to nuclear devastation.¹¹

The Soviet assessment pays attention to the contrast between U.S. and Soviet notions of sea control. The Soviet notion is conditional and time-place specific;¹² they say that the U.S. notion is general, complete, and pervasive, asserting in a fashion similar to the U.S. Air Force assertion about air superiority, that sea control is a necessary precondition for attacking critical targets in the rear. The Soviet perception of the difference between their notion of sea control and that of the United States means to them not only that they must be prepared to deny control of the seas to the United States, but they must be prepared to bring to bear all their military forces, not just the navy, to fight for control of seas at times and places of Soviet preference. Fortunately for the Soviets, their military doctrine and art predispose them to such thinking and preparations. In the event of war, those carrying out the U.S. Maritime Strategy could not reasonably expect to be engaged only by the Soviet Navy.

The most sophisticated Soviet analysis of the U.S. Maritime Strategy, so far, appeared late in 1986. Basically, that analysis, the work of Captain 1st Rank V. Chertanov, relates the Maritime Strategy to war in the Soviet

theaters while discussing both how current U.S. naval operations differ from those of the past and how the forward U.S. Maritime Strategy relates to preserving the U.S. sea lines of communication. Chertanov reiterates in several places that the U.S. Maritime Strategy would induce theater nuclear warfare, which, as we have seen, would occur in the territories of the allies of the two major belligerents.¹³

From now until about 1995, Soviet naval authorities and naval strategists are, and will be, faced with a major conundrum: They and their military and political superiors have produced a navy which, in Soviet economic and military terms, is one of strategic and operational-strategic proportions. It is a navy that trained and exercised throughout the 11th Five-Year Plan (1981-1985) according to the standards connoted by those terms, culminating in exercise OKEAN-85, one of a series of Soviet naval exercises which, since 1932, recurs at fifteen-year intervals according to the "Plan."

Now, as a matter quite apart and distinct from the U.S. Maritime Strategy, owing to fundamental changes in the structure of their military budget, the Soviets possess a strategic/operational-strategic navy which is limited by economics to the tactical and operational-tactical scope. The Soviets have been writing extensively about this revised navy over the last three years.¹⁴ The stated goal of the training for this revised Soviet Navy is to approximate as nearly as possible actual combat tactics. Much is made of relying on simulations to conserve resources otherwise consumed by actual operations at sea. "Savings" are to be dedicated to producing improvements for the future. Again, contrast is explicative: For 1986-1990, only about 5 percent of the Soviet defense budget is allocated for readiness activity, whereas in the United States, the allocation for armed forces readiness is about 29 percent.

Determining how and in what ways the U.S. Maritime Strategy might be altered—in view of the above-described Soviet limitations, opportunities, and counterstrategies—is an important challenge to us for the present and for the future. This is not the time to take credit for driving the Soviet economy, particularly the Soviet military economy, to despair and defeat. The military burden on their national economy is no longer a price the Soviets are unwilling to pay; they are only unwilling to pay that price in the manner in which they had been paying it. The Soviet defense budget has been dramatically restructured for the period 1986-1995. Before 1986, it emphasized new hardware acquisition and operations and maintenance (i.e., force structure and readiness) and de-emphasized research and development in an approximate 60/40 ratio. It now de-emphasizes force structure and readiness and emphasizes technological acceleration in an approximate 10/90 ratio. If the Soviets are even moderately successful in

advancing their military technologies, by the year 2000 the United States could face a more proficient and robust Soviet armed forces than it has yet faced. In the meantime, the Soviets seek a "tranquil" era during which their defense resources will be used to develop war-making technologies rather than to "buy" readiness and the familiar force structure improvements of the past.

The United States is not facing an opponent whose economy has been exhausted by their response to U.S. military modernization and a 600-ship navy. The current challenge to the U.S. Maritime Strategy is sharpened in focus by the time-honored practice of "reflexive control." That is, the Soviets—through deception, disinformation, guile, and perceptions management—try to induce their opponents to follow inappropriate strategies. If reflexive control works, then Soviet options are less costly than open warfare and provide the Soviet Union with immediate strategic advantages should war occur.¹⁵ This means that it is to the current advantage of the Soviet Union if Western maritime strategists believe that the U.S. Maritime Strategy already has circumscribed the activities of the Soviet Navy when, in fact, Soviet naval activities in the near term (1986-1990) have changed for different and more compelling internal reasons, i.e., a temporarily restructured defense budget with potentially serious consequences for the U.S. Maritime Strategy in the longer term, 1991 through 2000 and beyond.

Notes

1. See remarks by former Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral James D. Watkins, Current Strategy Forum, Naval War College, Newport, R.I.: 19 June 1985.

2. See James T. Westwood, "The Soviet Union's 12 Five-Year Plan and Its Zero-Growth Defense Budget," in David R. Jones, ed., *Soviet Armed Forces Review Annual: Vol. 10, 1986-1987* (Gulf Breeze, Fla.: Academic International Press, 1987).

3. See James T. Westwood, "National Economic Sources of Soviet Naval Conduct," forthcoming in Frank and Gillette, eds., *Sources of Soviet Naval Conduct* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1988).

4. U.S. Navy Dept., *Report to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1988* (Arlington, Va.: Navy Internal Relations Activity), pp. 8-9; and H. Lucas, "USN Forces Change in Soviet Naval Strategy," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 14 March 1987, p. 416.

5. "Reporter's Notebook, The Threat," *Defense Week*, 12 January 1987, p. 4; "Soviet Naval Exercises More Unpredictable," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 31 January 1987, p. 139; "Soviet Sea Exercise Rated 'Routine,'" *Washington Times*, 7 August 1987, p. A6; see also, L. E. Prma, "Chernavin's Navy," *Seapower*, April 1987, pp. 66-78, particularly p. 76 on a "stress on continuity."

6. See N. V. Chernavin, "The Navy—The 27th CPSU Congress," *Naval Digest* (Moscow), January 1986; S. A. Tyushkevich, "One of the Most Important Functions of the Popular State," *Political Self-Education* (Moscow), January 1986, pp. 35-36; I. Kapitanets, "The Combat Training; Reserves for Acceleration: The Effectiveness of the Cruise Mile," *Red Star* (Moscow), 18 July 1986, p. 1; I. Petrov, "Methodology and Economy," *Red Star* (Moscow), 3 September 1986, p. 2; N. V. Chernavin, "Combat Readiness of Naval Forces: At the Level of Modern Requirements," *Communist of the Armed Forces* (Moscow), October 1986, pp. 26-33.

7. See Chernavin.

8. Tomahawk's role in the U.S. Maritime Strategy is explained by S. J. Froggett, in "Tomahawk's Role," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, February 1987, pp. 51-54.

9. See Yu. Vetrov, "Visit for Insidious Purposes," *Red Star* (Moscow), 18 September 1983, p. 3; Robert P. McQuail, "Khrushchev's Right Flank," *Military Review*, January 1964, pp. 7-16; A. Tsvetkov, "The

Arctic in U.S. and NATO Plans," *Foreign Military Review* (Moscow), October 1985, pp. 7-12; John Berg, "Soviet Front-Level Threat to Northern Norway," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 2 January 1985, pp. 178-179; C. N. Donnelly and P. A. Pererson, "Soviet Strategists Target Denmark," *International Defense Review*, August 1986, pp. 1047-1051; Kensuke Ebata, "Soviets Simulate Attack on Japan," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 28 September 1985, p. 664.

10. Soviet analysis of the U.S. Maritime Strategy may be seen *inter alia* in S. G. Gorshkov, "Bases of Aggression," *Pravda*, 15 April 1983, pp. 4-5; N. Shaskolskiy, "The Pentagon's Ocean Strategy," *Red Star* (Moscow), 4 June 1983, p. 5; Yu. Vetrov, *op. cit.*; S. G. Gorshkov, *Radio Moscow*, 1300GMT, 16 July 1985; N. V. Chernavin, "The Red Pennant Rises Above the Waves," *Izvestiya*, 27 July 1985, p. 3; N. V. Chernavin "On Guard of Homeland," *New Times* (Moscow), 4 August 1986, pp. 6-7.

11. In "The Next Step," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, January 1987, pp. 40-49, former Naval War College department head F. J. West argues that the U.S. Maritime Strategy is one for conventional warfare and that it cannot be meaningful among the U.S. NATO Allies unless it is seen as a strategy for conventional warfare. Not only is this a departure from Mr. West's earlier position on nuclear warfare, but it is an argument that the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies reject for the reasons cited in the text.

12. Yu. Bystrov, "Gaining Control of the Sea," *Naval Digest* (Moscow), March 1977, pp. 15-20.

13. V. Chertanov, "U.S. Maritime Strategy," *Foreign Military Review* (Moscow), November 1986, pp. 49-53.

14. In Soviet military terminology, strategic military forces have weapons and maneuver ranges greater than 1000km but less than 5500km. Operational-strategic forces have ranges greater than 500km but less than 1000km. Operational-tactical forces have ranges greater than 300km but less than 500km. Tactical forces have ranges less than 300km. (Intercontinental forces have ranges greater than 5500km.) In 1986 and 1987, the Soviet Navy commander in chief stated that through at least 1990, the Soviet Navy will confine itself to tactical and operational-tactical training activities.

15. On this Soviet deceptive practice, see I. Ionov, "On Methods of Influencing an Opponent's Decisions," *Military Thought* (Moscow), December 1971; and N. Vosendin and S. Kuznetsov, "Modern Warfare and Surprise Attack," *Military Thought* (Moscow), June 1969.



"As members of the Armed Forces of the United States you are absolutely uninhibited by lack of room for improvement."

**Admiral R.J. Hays, U.S. Navy
Naval War College, June 1984**