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Gregory C. Baird

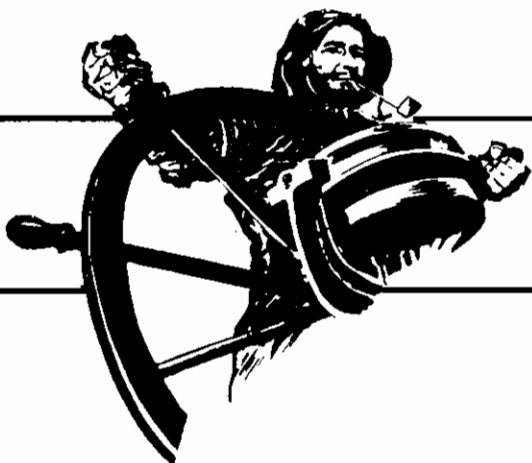
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SET AND DRIFT

THE SOVIET THEATER COMMAND: AN UPDATE

by

Gregory C. Baird*

Introduction. Since my article was originally published in this journal in 1980, additional information has become available which supports my conclusion that the theater command, the High Command, may be reinstated within the Soviet strategic command and control structure.¹ This research note presents this new evidence and briefly discusses some of the implications of the emerging Soviet strategic command and control structure.

1979—The Year of Change. 1979 was a tumultuous year for the Soviet command in the Far East.² Early in the year, Army Gen. G.I. Salmanov and Col. Gen. B.V. Snetkov assumed the commands of the Transbaykal and Far East Military Districts, respectively. This shakeup left Army Gen. I.M. Tretyak, commander of the Far East MD, as the "veteran" MD commander in the Far East. These new appointments were first identified by Western observers in February and March 1979 and suggested more than normal replacement of commanders, following as they did Brezhnev and Ustinov's March 1978 grand tour of the Far East.

While these events were interesting, events further westward were even more so. On 29 December 1978, *Pravda* reported that on the previous day Brezhnev had received Army Gen. V.I. Petrov and Col. Gen. G.I. Salmanov and congratulated them on their new appointments.³ As subsequent events revealed, Salmanov was appointed as commander of the Transbaykal MD and received a promotion. But Petrov's appointment from his previous position of Deputy Commander in Chief of Ground Forces remained unannounced. In fact, beyond his election as a deputy to the Supreme Soviet, announced in *Red Star* in April 1979, the Soviet press remained silent of Petrov or his activities until December 1980.

Clearly the Soviet silence regarding Petrov and his appointment was intentional. No less clear is the fact that the lack of press coverage did not indicate any falling from grace on Petrov's part. Being personally congratulated by Brezhnev is not the mark of a man on the way out. Moreover, Brezhnev's

*Mr. Baird is a military operations analyst with Pacific-Sierra Research Corporation.

personal involvement indicated that Petrov's appointment was to a position of some consequence. Hence, why the absence of press coverage concerning the current activities and position of a former Deputy Commander in Chief of Ground Forces? Curious indeed!

Fortunately, non-Soviet sources provide illumination on Petrov's activities. Following *Beijing Review's* disclosure that the Soviets had established a new Soviet command in the Far East in 1979, an article in *Issues & Studies*, a Taiwanese journal, provided additional details.⁴ Citing an unconfirmed February 1979 report, the article noted that the Soviets had established an "Eastern Joint Command." The command reportedly had control over the forces of the Siberia, Transbaykal and Far East MDs. Further, the article stated that Petrov "will be" the Commander in Chief.

By itself this report could easily be dismissed. However, months later, the authenticity of this report gained additional weight. In August 1980, the Kyodo News Agency reported that the Japanese Government had "disclosed" the establishment of a command with authority over the Siberia, Transbaykal and Far East MDs. It also identified Petrov as the commander of the "joint headquarters."⁵ However, shortly afterward Petrov was reassigned. By the end of December 1980, Petrov was back at the Ministry of Defense occupying the position of Commander in Chief of Ground Forces.⁶

Had Petrov's theater command be disbanded or had he been replaced? Fortunately, the Soviets were less secretive after Petrov's return to Moscow. In December 1980, there was a major conference of the Far East Military District Party organization which was addressed by Marshal Ogarkov, Chief of the General Staff. *Red Star's* reporting of the conference included a list of attendees. This list was headed by Army Gen. Valdimir L. Govorov, last reported

as Commander of the Moscow Military District, with Admiral Spiridonov, Commander of the Pacific Fleet, second.⁷ Notably, Govorov's position was not given, in contrast to all the others on the list. However, his ranking ahead of Admiral Spiridonov signaled that Govorov held an extremely high position in the Far East.

This early indication that Govorov had replaced Petrov as CINC was subsequently confirmed by press coverage of the 60th anniversary of the Mongolian People's Army in March 1981. The Soviets sent a ranking delegation headed, interestingly enough, by Petrov. According to a Montasame dispatch, among the Soviet delegation was Govorov, identified as "commander-in-chief of the Soviet Far Eastern troops."⁸ This title belongs, as it did in 1945, to the CINC of the High Command. Without question, then, the Soviets have established a High Command of Forces in the Far East, currently commanded by Govorov.

A major reorganization of the command and control structure of Soviet forces facing the Manchurian area of the People's Republic of China has, thus, occurred. In 1979, the Soviet military command in the Far East saw the replacement of two MD commanders, the establishment of a High Command and two CINCs of Forces in quick succession. The Soviets appear to have concluded that their decades-old, highly centralized command and control system was inappropriate to the requirements of contemporary warfare, particularly warfare that probably will involve two fronts. To remedy this difficulty, the Soviets have returned to the structure that worked so well for them during the Manchurian Operation of 1945.

Implications. The peacetime establishment of a High Command is not without precedent. The Soviets reestablished it in the Far East during the

92 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

period 1947-1953. Then it was initially established almost certainly due to the unrest caused by the culminating Chinese revolution. The Korean conflict caused its retention. However, the significance of the establishment of a High Command in this decade should not be lightly dismissed.

The reshuffling of military district commanders and the establishment of the High Command followed too closely Brezhnev and Ustinov's visit to the Far East to be completely unrelated. While what Brezhnev saw and was told during that visit remain unknown, it was probably impressed upon him that serious deficiencies existed in Soviet capabilities—materially and qualitatively. The materiel buildup since his visit is well known; the addition of the *Backfire*, the *Minsk*, the *Petrovsk* and the *Ivan Rogov* are only the most spectacular. However, as the above make clear, Soviet efforts to redress perceived deficiencies also included the more qualitative aspect of command and control. Beyond the significant strengthening of Soviet materiel capabilities in the Far East, they have created the command and control structure to wield these capabilities theater-wide.

Thus the most obvious result of the reorganization in the Far East is the unification of the capabilities of three military districts. The High Command provides the requisite direction to enable the flexible and coordinated

operations of the forces of these military districts against the PRC, Japanese and U.S. forces, as required. In this respect, the establishment of a modern High Command of Forces in the Far East TVD puts Soviet forces there closer to an operational war footing than they have been since 1953.⁹

Moreover, if the Japanese report is entirely correct, the High Command has been granted extraordinary authority. The Japanese report alludes to the fact that the High Command also controls the Far East-deployed *Backfires* and SS-20s. The subordination of strategic strike assets to a theater authority could have far-reaching consequences, particularly if duplicated in other theaters of military operations.

The devolution of control of selected strategic strike forces to theater authorities would greatly simplify the command and control problems faced by Moscow in a future conflict. While the decision to actually employ these forces would doubtless be retained by Moscow, theater authorities probably have responsibility for planning for and controlling employment. In essence, a dedicated theater strike force is created, removing the necessity and difficulty of operational-strategic force allocation decisions during hostilities. Moscow, consequently, could concentrate on control of intercontinental strategic forces and allocation of strategic reserves to the individual TVDs.

NOTES

1. See "Glavnoe Komandovanie: The Soviet Theater Command," *Naval War College Review*, May-June 1980, pp. 40-48.

2. Indeed, 1979 began an extremely tumultuous period for most MD and Group of Forces (GOF) commands. A major reshuffling of MD and GOF commanders took place between 1979 and 1981 involving 10 MDs and all GOFs except the Northern Group of Forces. See National Foreign Assessment Center, *Directory of Soviet Officials: National Organizations*, CR 81-11343, May 1981.

3. The author is indebted to Mr. Notre Trulock of the BDM Corporation for this information.

4. Yin Ch'ing-yao, "The Peiping-Moscow Relationship and Its Impact on Northeast Asia," *Issues & Studies*, March 1980, pp. 28-45.

5. See FBIS, *Daily Report: People's Republic of China*- 13 August 1980, p. C1.

6. See *Directory of Soviet Officials*.

7. V. Shuravlev, "Set the Example—Lead," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 27 December 1980, trans. JPRS 77515, *USSR Report: Military Affairs*, 5 March 1981, p. 4. It was probably returning from this conference that Admiral Spiridonov met his death.

8. See FBIS, *Daily Report: Asia and Pacific*, 25 March 1981, p. F2. The author is indebted to Mr. Phillip A. Petersen of the Defense Intelligence Agency for this reference.

9. This fact has not escaped the Chinese. They recently cited the "establishment of the *war zone command headquarters* (emphasis added)" as, among other Soviet actions, constituting a "military threat to China." See Li Huichuan, "The Crux of the Sino-Soviet Boundary Question," *Beijing Review*, 3 August 1981, p. 15.

