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A good portion of the comment, discussion and debate that has concerned "détente" has been as much the result of a failure to define it precisely as it has been directed towards its substance. An accommodation or relaxation of political tensions accompanied by an increase in weapons systems might appear to be inconsistent with "détente." However, the Soviet Union is faced with two potential enemies, the United States and China, each of which it must consider when dealing with the other.

THE DÉTENTE DEBATE

by

Frederick H. Hartmann

If the debate over foreign policy today has a focus, it is détente. But that focus remains blurred, chiefly because there is little agreement on what détente means. To some it is a Soviet formula designed to lull the United States into a relaxed defense mode, while the Soviets pull ahead in weapons. Others see it as an expression of accommodation in a nuclear-warhead-saturated age, as a mutual superpower recognition of the futility of trying to settle disputes with weapons.

A century before Christ, Catullus remarked: "Everybody has his own delusion assigned to him: but we do not see that part of the bag which hangs on our back." And when we face our opponent, for much the same reasons, we fail to see the bag which hangs on *his* back. Indeed, by addressing détente as though it were essentially a face-to-face

Soviet-American relationship, we miss most of the point.

We describe détente imprecisely, because we see it as something it is not. For détente is not a Soviet New Year's resolution to seek to diminish tension for the good of all concerned. Nor is it a cover-and-deception plan to lull the United States into somnolence. Instead it is a policy designed to make the best of a rather unpromising situation the Soviets confront, a situation whose essential and unpleasant features the Soviets cannot radically alter. To this situation the United States assigns the name "détente," while the Soviets normally avoid that term and speak instead of the "relaxation of tensions" or of "accommodation."

Humpty-Dumpty's "Words mean what I say they mean," has significance for anyone trying to understand

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international relations. However, the Soviet choice of terms is not deliberately deceptive. If the American term implies relaxation of tensions as a goal, the Soviet term describes it as a thing being done. And that part is true. In the political realm, as will be argued below, the Soviets by and large are relaxing tensions, even while, in the military realm, they continue to pile new weapons system upon new weapons system.

If this confusing Soviet behavior is not due to (1) bureaucratic inefficiency (i.e., the defense part of the establishment does not have the word), or (2) to deliberate deception (as the American critics of *détente* allege), it has to be (3) a hardheaded and quite understandable reaction to a difficult Soviet problem. Let us examine each possibility.

The first proposition (bureaucratic inefficiency) can be readily dismissed. The Soviet Communist Party leaders *never* get distracted to the point that the Defense Establishment is left to its own devices. Everything we know about the Soviet Union tells us that the Red Army is never permitted to branch off on its own policy path. Whatever the generals and the marshals may want, they do not get it through coercion of the party leaders. If the defense effort in Russia is increasing, it is not accidental and it is not contrary to the wishes of the party bosses.

In that case let us reverse the first proposition and interpret what we see as very deliberate defense expenditure increases. What, if anything, can a look at these military developments tell us? What can we conclude from the large-scale Soviet missile program which has three new systems currently coming on line? What of the MIRVing effort and the continued expansion of the Soviet Navy? What can an examination of military "hardware" tell us about what the Soviets may be up to?

Perhaps it is easiest to state where one can go wrong in looking at military

data, and then reach some conclusions about how to do it right.

It is comparatively easy in such politicomilitary analysis to make one of two opposite mistakes. One can either overstate the military-strategic part of the problem, or neglect to take it substantially into account. The first error normally takes the path of deducing foreign policy intentions altogether from military hardware developments. For example, the development of a supposedly "first-strike" capability is seen as the outward evidence of a still secret intention to commit those forces to action at some later date. Analyses along this line are usually shallow, confusing a simple capability with a determination to put it to use. The second (and opposite) error is to treat the military clues to foreign policy intentions as though they had nothing to do with one another. For example, deployments and redeployments of forces are dismissed as purely military matters. Those who commit this error usually are the same ones who give greater credence to verbal statements of peaceful intentions than experience warrants.

Striking a balance, the most reliable military indicators of political thinking, apart from alliances, are in the area of deployments, particularly troop dispositions.

In a nuclear age, with its massive, almost instantaneous ability to destroy human life in quantity, it may seem odd that the location of people in uniform should still provide a significant clue to political thinking. Yet it is not really odd at all. The only fairly sure way to control a foreign people is to deploy significant numbers of troops on their territory, as the Soviets have done in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Troops deployed on a bloc border serve notice, too, of intent to resist—the "tripwire" concept. Missiles cannot accomplish either of these tasks.

New missile systems of MIRVing or even new ship units tell us *how* an

enemy might or will strike at us in time of war. Troop deployments tell us *where* the enemy thinks he is in danger or in trouble.

What about the second explanation, deliberate deception? Is it not quite plausible that the Soviets, seeing a chance to deceive the gullible Americans, are simply trying to get ahead of us in strategic weapons, to achieve an overwhelming superiority from which lofty pinnacles they will be able to tell us exactly what we can and cannot do?

Lenin himself warned us: "People always have been and they always will be stupid victims of deceit and self-deception in politics, until they learn behind every kind of moral, religious, political, social phrase, declaration and promise to seek out the interests of this or that class or classes."

Deliberate Soviet deception to achieve a temporary lead would, of course, have its drawbacks, unless that lead could be exploited. To achieve a permanent lead would be much more worthwhile, if it were possible. But, in either case, cold reality suggests that following this path would be no panacea for the Soviets. When the United States had absolute nuclear superiority and the Soviets had no nuclear capability, we were unable to make the Soviets alter their behavior more than a modest amount. To envisage a Soviet Union with, say, a twentyfold overkill capability trying to blackmail a United States with a twelvefold overkill capability strains one's sense of the plausible. This does not mean we ought to be complacent about the Soviets out-gunning us; it only means that one must look at the total context.

Taking Lenin at his own word, what interest does the Soviet Union have in trying to attain a precarious and unreliable—and temporary—"superiority"? Is there any real doubt that the United States, if it wished, can outstrip any conceivable Soviet defense effort? What sequence of events would most likely

trigger an American defense effort of unprecedented magnitude, if not precisely this kind of deliberate deception?

Could Soviet behavior then represent a hardheaded and quite understandable reaction to a difficult Soviet problem?

Suppose we take the middle ground in the politicomilitary analysis suggested above, and assume that Soviet military developments (especially deployments) are not accidental or fortuitous. Suppose we assume that they are almost certainly closely orchestrated with their understanding of the political situation they confront.

If we did this, what would we conclude? We would conclude that the Soviets are in fact by and large avoiding head-to-head confrontations, while simultaneously making a great effort to upgrade their defenses. The rational connection between these two apparently opposite trends is that they are completely consistent if the Soviets today feel a greater sense of threat and danger than they did a few years ago.

A lot of people, citing Angola, reject this argument out of hand, believing that the Soviet Union is *not* trying to avoid head-to-head confrontation with the United States. But Angola, or any other single incident, has to be looked at and assessed in perspective.

An assessment of this kind has to be both relative and comparative. The existence of a highly armed Soviet Union, able to project power, is in itself an implicit confrontation from the U.S. point of view. If that power is there, it may be used. But what is striking is how little, anywhere, the Soviets are stirring the pot, compared with even a few years ago. The kind of adventure represented by the Cuban missile crisis, is utterly absent today. The Soviets are not becoming heavily involved militarily, on the ground, at selected points outside their frontiers. Apart from the Warsaw Pact forces which sit heavily astride Eastern Europe, Soviet military "advisers" are not found outside Russia in

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any quantity today. Egypt, with the greatest number, threw them out. In the whole of the Middle East, although Soviet weapons flood the area, Soviet control over their use has declined drastically.

Today the Syrians intervene, using Soviet weapons, to moderate the Lebanese civil war, firing on Palestinian forces, also equipped with Soviet weapons. The Soviet Union looks helplessly on. Meanwhile the pressure on Israel is lessened, and Sadat moves to a still more moderate position. Compare the mischiefmaking of the Soviets in the Middle East now with a half decade ago. The Soviets were actively fomenting trouble in the second and third Israeli wars; in the Yom Kippur War it threatened intervention only to save the Egyptian Third Army from complete defeat.

Angola, although its outcome depended on Cuban troops and Soviet arms, depended far more on the black-white issue in Africa for its success. The Soviets themselves actually did very little.

Indeed, around the whole periphery of the Soviet frontiers the sense of aggressive Soviet expansionist intervention is largely absent. In Eastern Europe the new order is described as the result of *Ostpolitik*, normally seen as a West German concession to Soviet pressures. Anyone traveling in Eastern Europe today might well be pardoned for thinking that, whatever its nominal nature, *Ostpolitik* has really meant a resumption of German economic influence in what was once the Soviet exclusive preserve of Eastern Europe.

The examples could be multiplied. But, with the possible exception of Angola they clearly point to a consistently cautious policy by the Soviets. What is it all due to?

The answer is not mysterious. It arises from some fundamental, even obvious facts. That these facts are often overlooked in the United States, tells us

much more about the lenses we peer through than about what we are staring at. Any people who could spend what we did on Vietnam (in money and in blood), considering its value (in any sense at all), can quite rightly be suspected of sometimes overlooking the obvious.

Consider these facts. Five years or so ago the United States was heavily involved in Vietnam, with over a half-million men on shore and two-thirds of a million deployed in the area, including the Seventh Fleet. We were also deployed in Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Okinawa. In short, we were deployed in force on the Asian mainland adjacent to north China and south China, with a fleet off China's central coast. In addition we supported a rival Chinese government on Formosa. Our principal ally in Asia was Japan, who in the 1930's and 1940's had occupied China and killed many Chinese.

Do we think that these deployments, with their alignment links, had no effect on Chinese behavior? Do we think that the physical presence of more than a million Americans just off the Chinese coast or across the frontiers, an America with thousands of nuclear warheads, had no real effect on China? What would we have done under these circumstances if we had been in charge of Chinese affairs between, say, 1966 and 1972 or 1973? Would we have told ourselves to disregard that deployment, to trust America's goodheartedness? Would we have argued in the Peking Great Hall for an aggressive confrontation with the Soviet Union? Or would we have argued for the most cautious possible policy, avoiding trouble with both superpowers?

During the Vietnam War the United States on occasion requested the Soviets to use their influence to help bring about peace. There is something highly ironic about our asking our enemy to assist us out of a situation where all our ready forces were fully committed, so

much so that we did not even feel able to respond effectively in the *Pueblo* incident against the third-rate power of North Korea. We asked the Soviet Union if they would help us regain our strategic mobility, so that we could confront them more effectively elsewhere, as in the Middle East. We asked our enemy to help us get out of Vietnam (i.e., withdraw from China's periphery) so that China, too, would at last enjoy some degree of strategic mobility. Not surprisingly, the Soviet Union did not help us out.

We had to find our own painful way out of our dilemma. Eventually we did; the troops came home from Vietnam. Or, to express it differently, the Chinese began to enjoy a greater sense of freedom of policy choice. Militarily speaking, there was more room for the Chinese to breathe. That situation came about first in principle on the night of 31 March 1968, when President Johnson, announcing that he would not seek reelection, ordered "unilaterally" a halt of the U.S. air and naval bombardment (except in the Demilitarized Zone). Johnson added: "We are prepared to move immediately toward peace through negotiations. So tonight, in the hope that this action will lead to early talks, I am taking the first step to de-escalate the conflict."

Even then, the cautious Chinese waited almost a year to be absolutely sure the United States was on its way out of mainland Southeast Asia. Then, just as our physical withdrawal was actually underway, the Chinese kicked the Soviets on the shins in battalion and regimental strength in a flare-up on the Ussuri River frontier. Serious fighting occurred on 2 March 1969, with a second major clash on 15 March. In May 1969 there were further clashes in Sinkiang and again on 10 June. Yet again on 13 August, China's protest note that month noted 429 border violations in June and July alone; the Soviets in their counterprotest, said it

was 488 from mid-June to mid-August.

Compare this set of events with actual U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam: the first withdrawal, widely expected in advance (25,000 men), was announced on 8 June; the second (35,000 men) was ordered on 16 September. These withdrawals confirmed and continued the Chinese judgment.

In July 1971 President Nixon announced his decision to visit Peking and on 2 August 1971, Secretary of State Rogers officially announced that the United States would vote to seat Peking in the U.N. (but not to expel Taiwan). The new U.S. policy was now well in gear. In this way the United States regained strategic mobility as did the Chinese. And in this way the Soviets lost a great part of theirs. In the years which followed, as U.S. troops withdrew from Asia, Chinese and Soviet troops moved to their common frontier.

In this new and unpleasant situation for the Soviets it is not at all difficult to imagine the dialogue around the green baize table in the Kremlin.

Secretary Brezhnev turns to Foreign Minister Gromyko.

"Well, Gromyko. A fine mess this. The Americans are no longer tied down and the Chinese are now probing the frontier, hardly hiding their satisfaction. What are you going to do about it?"

Gromyko spreads his hands in a disarming gesture. "Well, Mr. Secretary, it had to come sooner or later. We have had a very long run of extraordinary luck, with the Chinese more irritated with the United States since 1949 than with us, and worried over U.S. troop deployments. It couldn't last forever."

Brezhnev is not mollified. "What can you do to offset it in the political sphere?"

Gromyko replies: "What the Americans have done is to cease to handicap themselves. We never made a mistake like that. We can't correct what we haven't done wrong. We have no 'China card' to play."

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"How about a diversionary movement somewhere else?"

Gromyko: "Now that the Chinese are no longer tied down, we should be cutting our commitments elsewhere, not enlarging them."

Brezhnev: "But there are surely many opportunities to stir the pot somewhere . . . ?"

Gromyko: "I wouldn't recommend it on our European flank where the Poles, the Hungarians, and the Czechs are always dissatisfied despite everything we've done. And those Arabs! You never know how long they will stay with a policy. Besides, with the Americans free now, and especially with their support for the Zionists, we stand a real chance of a clash if we push too hard there."

Brezhnev: "Then you don't really have any bright ideas?"

Gromyko: "Well, there is Africa. Cheap and safe gains are available there. The United States would be embarrassed even if not very much involved, any more than we are. Of course, it would be transitory. Those African governments don't last long."

Brezhnev nods. He turns to his generals.

"Gromyko has no idea for a real piece of political cleverness. But if we do nothing the United States will lord it over us, thinking they can intimidate us. What do you say?"

It is not really necessary to detail here what any Russian general or admiral is likely to say at this point in the conversation. The only thing obscure without a bug to listen in would be the amounts of money named and the specific size of the new military hardware programs, plus the degree of acceleration of existing hardware programs recommended.

If this imagined conversation is close to what really happened, why is not the situation more widely understood? Why is détente still argued as though it represented either a sincere "sweetness

and light" approach by the Soviets or a scheme to distract us long enough to seize the lead in weapons? There are two reasons.

The first reason is that the problem is not often approached the way nations in fact handle national security problems. People often are not very sensitive to the fact that national security, if preserved or achieved, is the result of choosing a wise blend of both political and military policies. Clausewitz a century and a half ago said: "War is not merely a political act; but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means." Clausewitz was warning about the dangers of looking at military actions divorced from political consequences. He did not emphasize the reverse case, but he would have been equally aghast at a political policy divorced from military considerations. In national security affairs, what freedom from the fear of imminent attack you can achieve stems from the careful orchestration of both political and military choices. What safety the one set does not provide must come from the other. What is lost in one sphere must be gained from the other. The freer from political system constraint one's enemy becomes, the more one must press ahead with one's own arms. The less one's enemy is worried about his *back*, the more you must make him worry about his *front*. Or vice versa.

There is a fundamental "law" of international relations which, like any law can be broken at a penalty: the law of "the conservation of enemies." What that law tells us is that one does not normally seek to accumulate more enemies at any one time than one can usefully handle! The penalty for breaking this law is drastic. It was what constrained China when she had potentially hostile military forces on every side. It is what constrains Russia today now that she has to deal with an antagonistic China free to express her antagonism.

There is a second and important reason why the situation is not as well understood as it should be. It comes from technology and the unconscious effect this has on our feeling for geography.

Nothing could be triter than to say we have conquered space. We can send men to the moon or ICBM missiles from U.S. bases halfway around the world to their targets. So can the Soviets. From these facts it is possible to slip unknowingly into a downgrading of old-fashioned geographical, or even geopolitical thought. It is possible to deploy a million men in Asia and discount their restraining effect on the Chinese. It is possible to arrive at a state of mind where one thinks of a deployment overseas in narrow theater terms: the effect in Vietnam. The "real" military ratio for "the big picture" is still thought of in terms of nuclear ICBM's. The more one becomes fascinated by the ratio of U.S.-Soviet throw-weight, warheads, or delivery vehicles, the less one tends to think of Soviet or Chinese freedom to react in anything but such megatonnage frames of reference. At least until one confronts a *Pueblo* incident with no ready forces at hand, or the Chinese kick you on the shins on the frontier. Because technologically slanted logic suggests that the Chinese cannot decide to kick you in the shin. They have few nuclear warheads and you have many. But the Chinese did do it. So strategic decisions must indeed turn on something more (or something less) than a nuclear warhead count. Technologically slanted strategic thinking also suggests that if the Chinese ignore the warhead ratio implications they have done something foolish and they can be ignored.

But the Chinese did do it. And the Soviets have been very upset indeed. They do not in the least ignore it.

If 800 million Chinese give a collective growl, and they are your neighbors, it is not sufficient solace to sit in one's

armory and count one's warheads—even if one can ignore the future when the Chinese will have more warheads. The United States can move in and out of Asia, closer or further from the Chinese, at will. The Soviets cannot. That geographic fact has fundamental political and national strategic implications.

Granted everything above, what is likely to come of it? Again there is the primarily political side of the equation and the primarily military side. They are part of the same equation, but they are not identical in nature or weight.

Consider the political side first. Unless the United States gets overclever ideas about "exploiting" the Sino-Soviet tension instead of leaving the Chinese and the Russians to deal with it, the continuing burden on the Soviets can be expected to constrain their behavior. The Chinese, with a disputed frontier of 500,000 square miles to discuss with the Soviet Union, are hardly likely to bring any degree of comfort to the Soviets as far as one can see down the road ahead. Of course, the United States would be ill-advised to expect this tension to take care of all its own policy needs.

The military side of the equation is potentially more difficult to handle. If the argument above is correct, the increased Soviet defense expenditures arise from an increased sense of Soviet insecurity. If the United States matches or exceeds the Soviet effort the Soviets ought logically, within the constraints of their budget possibilities, to increase that effort. Otherwise the United States has the upper hand. But if the United States, alternatively, decides that it can afford to allow the Soviets to forge ahead, then the Soviets, if they do, will be relieved of the sense of being behind in the national security balance, and they will be ahead in possessing instruments of force. They will feel freer to act while having an enhanced capability. They might, as an example, use their new aircraft carriers as they become operational, or their new Marine Force

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for adventures overseas. Of course, that will not make the Chinese vanish so it is not quite what this way of putting things suggests. Nevertheless, there is a clear danger for the United States in allowing the Soviets to feel that militarily they are ahead.

Taking both sides of this dilemma within a single view, what seems to be required is a careful pacing by the United States of its arms effort to remain approximately equal in overall capability. Like the temptation for the United States to "improve" on the Sino-Soviet tension, the danger in such an "arms race" is to assume that the Soviets are striving to achieve that more or less mythological "first-strike" vantage point and to get carried away emotionally. Any "arms race" has to be as coolly conducted as a chess game.

The point then is that, if the United States remains roughly equal with the Soviets militarily, and provided Sino-Soviet tension does not miraculously evaporate, the United States will retain the overall advantage in the national

security area. Given such a policy, we can reasonably expect the Soviets to remain "devoted" to détente to the same degree as before, and for the same reasons. For the Soviets are pursuing détente in the way we have described because the bag which formerly hung on our back has been shifted and now hangs on their back.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



A graduate of Princeton University, where he completed his undergraduate and graduate work, Professor Hartmann has had extensive teaching experience in civilian universities and service colleges. His major publications include *The Relations of Nations* and *The New Age of American Foreign Policy*. Currently he is Special Academic Advisor and Alfred Thayer Mahan Professor of Maritime Strategy at the Naval War College.

