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Chapter 12

SOVIET NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION- MAKING

by Kurt Campbell and Jeffrey W. Legro

Winston Churchill's characterization of the Soviet Union as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma may overstate Western understanding of the USSR's national security decision-making. The evidence in this domain is sparse, and what we do have is incomplete. Indeed, the Soviets have taken extraordinary steps to maintain the black box that shields how and why their decisions are made. With these caveats in mind, knowledge of Soviet decision-making can be summed up in a few general statements. First, the Soviet leadership is an integrated political-military body, where political authority is dominant, but where the professional military retains an important influence. Second, the role of institutions and individuals varies within and between leaderships, according to the issue under consideration (e.g., doctrine, procurement, etc.), and between times of peace and war. The potential for evolution in the roles of institutions is particularly apparent in the cur-

rent period of "perestroika." Gorbachev has initiated changes that appear to be aimed at transforming the security decision-making apparatus. Finally, the historical record of decision-making in superpower crises indicates that the Soviet Union has been very cautious in confrontations with the United States, a tendency that need not prove true in future clashes.

The Actors

The General Secretary, the Politburo, the Defense Council, and the General Staff represent the core of the national security apparatus. The Communist Party dominates life in the Soviet Union and the Politburo is its executive council. The Politburo, now composed of twelve full (voting) and eight candidate (non-voting) members, is headed by the General Secretary (Mikhail Gorbachev).

The Defense Council links politicians and the military at the highest level and is thought to act as a powerful subcommittee of the Politburo, dealing with national security issues on a day-to-day basis. This shadowy body, which has been reconfigured several times since World War II, is chaired by the General Secretary and is believed to include the minister of defense, the minister of foreign affairs, the KGB chief, and the chairman of the Council of Ministers (the head of the official government administrative body), among others. Its members have greater access to intelligence and military information than do other members of the Politburo and thus this council importantly shapes most national security issues.

The General Staff, the command organ of the military services, is organizationally under the direction of the Ministry of Defense but has direct ties to the Defense Council. In contrast with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it is headed by one man (Army General Moiseyev) and has more power over the five individual military services (ground forces, air forces, strategic rocket forces, air defense troops, and navy).

Leadership Change and Issue Areas

The role of these different actors in decision-making varies with the power of the leader and with the type of issue under consideration.

The power of the General Secretary vis-à-vis his colleagues has tended to fluctuate over time. Usually the leader builds increasing authority as his tenure in office lengthens (Khrushchev is an important exception here). As his power grows, the General Secretary is increasingly able to act independently of his colleagues on the Politburo, and his individual style and preferences will have a greater influence on decisions.

The decision-making style and substance of different leaderships has also varied considerably. For example, the military under Brezhnev had much greater autonomy and authority in its duties than was the case in the Stalin and Khrushchev periods. With Marshal Grechko's ascendance to full membership on the Politburo in 1973, the professional military had a direct say in the highest decision-making body of the Soviet Union. Today the military is again being dominated by the aggressive political leadership of Gorbachev. In light of the

decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, the conclusion of the INF treaty, and the unceremonious firing of high-ranking generals in the wake of the young German Mathias Rust's feat of landing a small plane in Red Square, and the unilateral reduction of the armed forces, speculation about military unhappiness with the Gorbachev leadership may be justified.

Decision-making power is not only a product of institutional affiliations, but of personalities as well. As the case of Marshal Ogarkov illustrates, a forceful individual with clearly articulated views can have a significant impact on policy. Although Ogarkov was removed in 1988 from his position as Chief of the General Staff, his stress on the need for technological improvements in the Soviet conventional force posture has had a lasting influence.

Another key determinant of the decision-making process is the specific issue under consideration. The four most important issue areas are doctrine, force structure and procurement, arms control, and crisis management.

1. *Doctrine.* Military doctrine in the Soviet Union has two distinct levels: the "socio-political" and the "military-technical." The dominant socio-political level considers the nature, objectives, and initiation of war and is dictated exclusively by the Party leadership. The subordinate military-technical level deals with assessing the threat, force structure, strategy, and troop preparation, and has traditionally been considered the realm of military professionals. There is an inherent tension between these two levels, as the socio-political level stresses war prevention, while the military-technical level emphasizes war preparation, particularly the principles of surprise, initiative, and preemption.

The Soviet military wields significant influence be-

cause of its traditional monopoly on military expertise and information. There has been no civilian structure, such as the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense, that parallels the military command. No institution, except in limited aspects the KGB, is able to challenge the military's interpretation of strategic requirements and planning needs or its estimates of the size and nature of military threats. Thus, despite having no formal vote in the major decision-making bodies, the military retains an important *de facto* authority. Gorbachev may be attempting to reduce this authority by, among other things, shifting oversight authority for defense budget matters to a standing Committee on Military Affairs, established in the new Soviet Parliament, and encouraging more open debate on national security issues.

Over the past two decades, the military's monopoly in the realm of strategic nuclear weapons has weakened somewhat as scientists and civilian analysts have begun to take part in policy matters, much the same way U.S. civilians did in the 1950s. In matters of conventional warfare, the monopoly remains largely intact. However, in this area, too, there have been indications under the Gorbachev leadership that the civilian role will be increased.

2. *Force Structure and Procurement.* The political leadership oversees all decisions and is probably directly involved with questions pertaining to major systems, especially weapons that require significant resources. Most requests for new weapons originate with the individual military services and are assessed and rationalized by the General Staff. As weapons have become technologically more sophisticated, the academy of sciences and top science advisors have assumed increasing importance in weapons acquisition and R&D investment decisions.

3. *Arms Control.* Decision-making in arms control is similar to deliberations on doctrine except that civilians outside the top leadership have a more prominent role. The chief Soviet negotiators have historically been senior foreign ministry officials. Despite the military's efforts to deny information to even these diplomats, their role has grown as a function of their experience and the necessarily political nature of the arms control process. Under Gorbachev, the now ex-Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Akhromeyev, has played a key part in arms control negotiations at summit meetings. In this role, it is unclear whether he is a personal emissary of Gorbachev, the official representative of military interests whose say is crucial, or both. Other civilian participants in the arms control process include analysts in academic research institutes that study the West, whose knowledge has been applicable to the ongoing negotiations with the U.S. and its allies. Finally, scientists have become influential because of the crucial link between rapidly changing technology and national security affairs.

4. *Crisis Management.* Decision-making in a crisis will depend on the severity of the situation and the time frame available for choice. For example, in the case of a surprise attack, the General Secretary would make the launch decision on his own authority; the Soviets have their own equivalent to the U.S. President's "nuclear football," a briefcase with nuclear release codes which accompanies their leader. And in the case of a plane intruding into Soviet airspace, the top political leadership might not be contacted at all—as is purported to have been the case with KAL 007—and the plane could be shot down according to standard operating procedures.

There is no question that political officials have the

exclusive authority to release nuclear weapons for use. Soviet leaders are extremely concerned about unauthorized or accidental use of nuclear weapons, and they have gone to extensive lengths to prevent it. In the early days of the nuclear era, warheads were kept separate from delivery systems and were under the control of the KGB. Today, missiles of the strategic rocket forces are equipped with multiple key systems (which the U.S. calls permissive action links, PALs), and it is likely that Soviet submarines also have some sort of external control device. In the case of tactical nuclear weapons held outside the Soviet Union, nuclear charges are still housed separately in special ammunition storage areas. It is probable that the KGB, with its own communications network, continues to play a role in the control of nuclear weapons.

As in the day-to-day formulation of national security policy, the locus of crisis decision-making is the Defense Council. This body appears to be a peacetime analogue of the State Defense Committee, a unified political-economic-military leadership organ which assumed supreme command of the country in World War II (and would do so again if war breaks out). Despite the explicit dominance of civilian political officials in the Defense Council, the military can have a significant implicit influence. The nature of a conflict situation demands expertise in military affairs and, in this realm, the professional soldiers by and large have exclusive authority. Because the General Staff acts as a secretariat for the Defense Council, it is also able to shape the agenda and decisions. More directly, the military is tasked to make a timely determination of an outbreak of hostilities and a potential enemy missile strike. Such a judgment would, of course, have an important impact in a crisis. This impact is of particular concern given the military's em-

phasis on offensive operations, especially the key role of preemption should a large-scale nuclear exchange appear imminent. Although Gorbachev's "new thinking" in national security affairs has denounced preemption and promised to upgrade the importance of defense in Soviet strategic thought, the results in this area remain unclear.

History of Soviet Decisions on Nuclear Weapons in Crises

The historical record—albeit a very limited and opaque one—is somewhat at odds with an image of the Soviet leadership as an integrated political-military command where an offensive-minded military has considerable influence. One might expect from such a leadership a skillful manipulation of the armed forces for political purposes and a military able to tilt the war prevention/war preparation dilemma in favor of seizing the initiative. In practice, however, the Soviet leadership has been extremely cautious regarding the use of force in the few superpower crises that have occurred (the Cuban missile crisis and the 1973 Middle East War are the most notable). Readiness levels of the Strategic Rocket Forces have never been raised as a means of demonstrating resolve. Furthermore, from what little we know, the military has not been particularly eager to advocate use of force in crises with the U.S.

This record should not suggest that we can expect the USSR to roll over in future clashes. Most of our evidence on Soviet crisis behavior comes from a period when the U.S. enjoyed overwhelming nuclear superiority. This is

no longer the case. Such a change, however, does not mean that future Soviet decisions in crises will err on the side of war preparation and initiation. The Soviets are still constrained by a desire to avoid nuclear war and a uniquely disadvantageous geo-political situation. In any conflict, especially those involving nuclear weapons, the USSR is surrounded by potential adversaries, not the least of which is China. As Brezhnev has asserted, "There are two camps of nuclear weapons: those in the USSR and those aimed at the USSR." Soviet decisions in crises will be driven by a number of factors, including the composition of the particular leadership, the international and regional balance of forces, and the specific interests at stake. As these factors vary, so too will policy choices.

Conclusion

Soviet national security decisions are made by an elite group of political and military Communist Party officials. The nature of the decision-making process can vary with the power of the General Secretary, the particular issue confronted, and the relative state of peace and war. Political authority is dominant, yet the military retains an important influence through its near-exclusive expertise in matters of armed conflict. The Gorbachev leadership has indicated a desire to weaken this monopoly by establishing alternative sources of military planning and threat analysis, but the fate of such efforts remains uncertain. Finally, the history of Soviet decisions in superpower crises indicates that the USSR's

leaders are hesitant to risk the possibility of a major conflict, especially a nuclear war, with the United States.

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