

Naval War College Review

Volume 45
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 12

1992

Deterrence and the Revolution in Soviet Military Doctrine

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Recommended Citation

Canfield, Jeffrey L. and Garthoff, Raymond L. (1992) "Deterrence and the Revolution in Soviet Military Doctrine," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 45 : No. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol45/iss2/12>

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“Deterrence” Could It Have Helped Us Stumble into War?

Lieutenant Jeffrey L. Canfield, U.S. Navy

Garthoff, Raymond L. *Deterrence and the Revolution in Soviet Military Doctrine*.
Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990. 210pp. \$29.95

RAYMOND GARTHOFF has produced a book that stands out among open source discussions of Soviet military doctrine. He is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and an expert on U.S.-Soviet strategic relations. Few writers are as well qualified to describe the evolution of that relationship and illuminate the post-Cold War change in Soviet military doctrine.

The author had access to a complete set of the Soviet General Staff journal, *Voyennaya mys'* (Military Thought), including confidential issues; he also relied upon public speeches and articles of Soviet spokesmen and on the revealing *Voroshilov* lectures. His use of these sources engenders both the insights and pitfalls which inform the book's approach.

The concept of “Soviet” military doctrine may soon be relegated to the province of history. If so, Garthoff's book will be valued for its carefully crafted perspective on the past rather than as the foundation for the rethinking of U.S. policy and strategy.

The author has sought to characterize, first, Soviet thought on deterrence and the prevention of war as it developed between 1945-1985, then the nature of Soviet “New Thinking” on these issues from 1985-1991. He has focused on the role of deterrence in the superpower strategic relationship, carefully distinguishing

that element from broader aspects of strategy and war prevention policies in order to differentiate U.S. and Soviet approaches.

Garthoff contrasts “deterrence American style” with what he perceives as Soviet emphasis on war prevention. “The United States,” he tells us, “has addressed the problem of preventing war almost exclusively in terms of military capabilities, while the Soviet Union has addressed it primarily in terms of political motivations and intentions.” Garthoff maintains that deterrence in the West supplanted the functions of military strategy and foreign policy, in the process becoming an end in itself that buttressed an active policy of containment. In contrast, the Soviets viewed deterrence as a condition, arrived at through a balance of political and military measures, and functioning as part of a broader war prevention strategy.

He demonstrates how these divergent approaches gave rise to a host of misperceptions and conflicts. In his view, reliance on mutual deterrence to ensure strategic stability encouraged the arms race, ignored war initiation scenarios other than deliberate attack, raised tensions, engendered a perception of intimidation, and foreclosed other options for reducing the risk of war. As a result, American strategists exaggerated the Soviet expansionist impulse. The Soviets, in turn, indulged in semantic and ideological distortions of U.S. doctrine, confused the distinct concepts of deterrence and containment, and ascribed to the West intent to compel accommodation and pursuit of war-waging strategies where neither existed.

Garthoff marshals the literature to demonstrate that by 1960 the Soviet leadership had reached the conclusion that a nuclear war could not be won and that its prevention demanded primacy. New light is shed on the changing significance of surprise attack in Soviet thinking, on misperceptions engendered by Soviet adoption of preemptive strategies, and the impact of the West’s adoption of flexible response and escalation control doctrine. Garthoff posits a thesis that the Soviets viewed the latter as an effort to find a war-waging strategy. He highlights the corresponding increase in Soviet emphasis on limiting hostilities to conventional conflict, and demonstrates how procurement, training, and capabilities shifted in accordance with that emphasis.

Similarly, Soviet theater nuclear enhancements during the 1970s and 1980s are characterized as an effort to counter Western capabilities and convince the West that limited warfare options really did not exist.

Garthoff’s discussion of the post-1985 Gorbachevian revolution examines the dramatic changes in Soviet strategic concepts and underlying military doctrine. In Garthoff’s formulation, it is not the goal which has changed—the prevention of war—but rather the means chosen to realize that goal. Military means to achieve security, now recast as a mutual condition, were replaced by primarily political means. In fact, Garthoff argues that Soviet military doctrine was redefined, with the prevention of war explicitly designated as the main task. He

employs the source material to indicate how Soviet theorists came to adopt a defensive, reactive strategy, belatedly recognizing new political, military, and economic realities in Europe. He asserts that the reformist leadership succeeded in reorienting Soviet strategy from an offensive concept geared to the achievement of military victory to a defensive one designed to rebuff any attack and quickly achieve war termination. Finally, he illuminates the resultant transformation of their approach to controlling and terminating superpower conflict should deterrence fail.

The study is not without limitations and provocative theses. Many readers will find themselves at odds with Garthoff's perspective on the historical role of deterrence in Western strategy. One might counter that the requirements of deterrence were based on Soviet capabilities rather than intentions precisely because there was no consensus on actual Soviet intentions. Deterrence became the centerpiece of Western strategy as the one concept around which domestic and alliance consensus could be built, and provided a doctrinal anchor and common touchstone during turbulent times.

There are other problems attending reliance on these official sources. First, even articles appearing in the confidential issues of *Military Thought* must be regarded only as indicators of underlying processes which remain largely unknown. Publication in such an organ serves many purposes, only one of which is face-value discussion or promulgation of policy and doctrine. Second, the author does not distinguish sufficiently between the positions of civilian and military spokesmen. The differences among the bureaucratic and political interests of the military establishment and state or Party institutions are never made clear. Third, Garthoff discusses only meagerly how the deterministic, quantitative approach to military science and art colors Soviet perceptions of the strategic relationship. Neither does he identify which remnants of this bias are likely to remain in the post-Cold War period.

These minor concerns aside, Garthoff's presentation of the evolution of Soviet strategic doctrine and his informed perspective on mutual misperceptions in the strategic relationship will make this book well worth study for a long time to come.

McCWire, Michael. *Perestroika and Soviet National Security*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991. 510pp. \$18.95

As the winds of change swept through the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s much of the world's

attention was riveted by the series of unbelievable events: the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, *glasnost'* in the Soviet Union. The decline in East-West tensions generated euphoria in the West. That