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"CORRELATION OF FORCES" IN SOVIET USAGE--ITS MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS

Final Report

March 1978

Technical Note
SSC-TN-4383-2

By: Richard E. Pipes

Contributing Author: Arthur A. Zuehlke, Jr.

Prepared for:

Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
1400 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22209

Contract MDA903-75-C-0347

ARPA Order No. 2520-8

SRI Project 4383

SRI International
1611 N. Kent Street
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SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM

1. REPORT NUMBER: SSC-TN-4383-2
2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.:
3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER:

4. TITLE (and Subtitle): "CORRELATION OF FORCES" IN SOVIET USAGE-- ITS MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS

5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED: Technical Note

6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER: N/A

7. AUTHOR(s): Richard E. Pipes
Contributing Author: Arthur A. Zuehlke, Jr.

8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s): MDA903-75-C-0347
ARPA Order No. 2520-8

9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS: SRI-International
1611 N. Kent Street
Arlington, Virginia 22209

10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS: SRI Project 4383

11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS: Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency
1400 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22209

12. REPORT DATE: Final Mar 1978

13. NO. OF PAGES: 14

14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if diff. from Controlling Office): Defense Supply Service-Washington
Room 1D245, The Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20310

15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report): UNCLASSIFIED

15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE: N/A

16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this report)

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from report)

N/A

18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

N/A

19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

U.S. Policymaker
Foreign Policy
Global and Regional Correlation of Forces

20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

This technical note assesses in the Soviet context, the operational significance of the concept correlation of forces and draws implications for U.S. policymakers. In the discussion, the concept is examined for its utility in making rational assessments of complex socio-political phenomena both at a global and regional level of analysis. It is argued, on the basis of a survey of Soviet publications, that the concept correlation of forces does not lend itself to quantitative assessment, but rather by virtue of its holistic connotations, represents a highly complex and changing array of factors best expressed in generalized terms.

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EDITION OF 1 NOV 65 IS OBSOLETE

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

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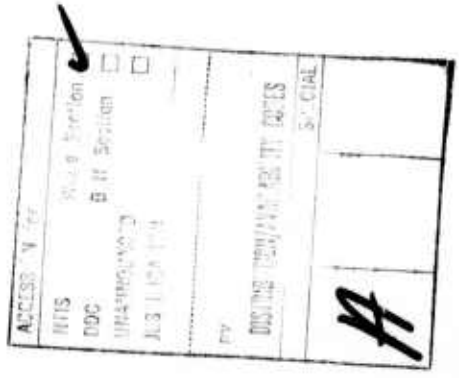
CONTRACTUAL TASK

This technical Note is in partial fulfillment of research under Item 0001 of Contract No. MDA903-75-C-0347.



FOREWORD

For several decades, authoritative Soviet spokesmen have referred to the "world correlation of forces" as though it were an exact calculus describing the relative position of the capitalist and socialist "camps" in the global competition between two systems. At various times, such as the immediate postwar period, Soviet leaders have alleged the correlation of forces to have "shifted" in favor of the USSR and the interests of world socialism. More recently, a "decisive" shift was said to occur favoring socialism and was linked by Soviet authors among other things with the "general crisis of capitalism" and the Soviet attainment of strategic nuclear parity. The question then presents itself, what is the significance of these Soviet observations on the trend of world affairs? Or, put another way, what is the operational meaning and utility of the concept correlation of forces? Does it play a critical role in the long-term planning and formulation of Soviet foreign policy? These questions and others are addressed in this technical note, authored by Dr. Richard Pipes, Senior Research Consultant, with contributions by Arthur A. Zuehlke, Jr., Research Analyst.

This report on the Soviet concept of the correlation of forces is sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency, as part of Contract No. MDA 903-75-C-0347.

Richard B. Foster
Director
Strategic Studies Center

"CORRELATION OF FORCES" IN SOVIET USAGE--
ITS MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS

The term "correlation of forces" occurs frequently in Soviet writings on international affairs both in a broad sense, bearing on the global relationship of the "capitalist" and "socialist" camp, and in a narrower one, applicable to situations in specific regions of the world. In this connection the question arises what, if any, operative significance is to be attached to this concept; do the Soviet leaders, in planning foreign policy actions, indeed assess the "correlation of forces" with which they are confronted and if so, what criteria do they employ? The answer to these questions is of no small importance, for on it depends in some measure the manner in which the U.S. policymaker can assess as well as influence such intentions.

In analyzing the problem, it is clear that a sharp distinction must be drawn between the broad (global) and the narrow (regional) usages of the concept of "correlation of forces". The concept finds both applications in Soviet writings.

Addressing first the global "correlation of forces," it is evident that this organizing concept does not lend itself to a precise quantitative assessment. Though it purports to subsume all the relevant variables which are at play in the dynamic of global change underlying the competition between two systems, these variables are neither wholly identifiable, nor do they comprise a fixed set. Furthermore, these variables lack measurable empirical referents, and their possible interrelationships and synergistic effects are not specified, at least in published Soviet sources available in the West. As a Soviet authority, during a discussion of the regional dimension of the problem, concedes:

> Incomparably more complex is the overall correlation of forces in the world. It is difficult to give a calculation of the number of factors partaking in its formation. Some of them have changing significance and are capable of behaving in a unpredictable manner.[1]

While the application of the concept "correlation of forces" to a region significantly narrows the universe of relevant variables, it seems unlikely that this would enable Soviet analysts to progress very far from what must be categorized as primarily an intuitive, qualitative assessment. The treatment given to regional trends in Soviet writings remains highly descriptive with frequent reiteration of a typology of variables which are said to influence and propel events in a specific direction. The descent from the abstract global level of analysis to a regional level permits the description of these variables (for example, the spectrum of "progressive forces") in a more concise fashion, and enables their national and cultural peculiarities to be specified. There is little evidence to suggest, however, that Soviet specialists have approached the sophistication of their Western social science counterparts in analyzing the socio-political processes and mechanisms by which these "forces" interact in a national context. Such notions as "political culture," social "mobilization," and the process of "moderization," important in Western explanations of developing societies, tend to be excluded in Soviet discussion, focused as they are on class analysis and the precepts of Marxism-Leninism. In light of the difficult and painstaking progress made in Western social science toward the elaboration of viable quantitative methods of analysis, Soviet claims to a "scientific" assessment are best viewed as referring to a process of deductive reasoning, proceeding from the "laws of history" and "class struggle" developed in Marxist-Leninist theory. Thus the Soviet concept, "correlation of forces," even when employed in a regional context, apparently grants little in the way of precise analysis based on measurable, empirical indicators. On the other hand, the concept subsumes a dynamic set of

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[1] G. Shaknazarov in Kommunist, No. 3 (1974), p. 86, cited in Michael J. Deane, "The Soviet Concept of the 'Correlation of Forces,'" SSC-TN-4383-1, SRI/Strategic Studies Center, p. 22.

variables; and when these are observed to be changing in directions more favorable to socialism (or against the interests of the developed capitalist West), a qualitative judgment may be made.

The study of Soviet writings on the subject suggests that whenever Communists authorities speak of the "global correlation of forces" they are primarily expressing, for public consumption, a conviction that the trend of events is moving in favor of the communist cause--a conviction which is essential to them insofar as "Marxism-Leninism," the theoretical underpinning of the system and a Soviet surrogate for forms of political legitimacy customary in the West, rests on the concept of an inexorable progression of history toward "socialism." It would be difficult for them to concede that the global correlation is shifting, even temporarily, the other way: to do wo would be tantamount to raising doubts about the ultimate triumph of their cause. This perhaps explains in part Zhdanov's claim in 1947 that the outcome of World War II had "sharply changed the correlation of forces between the two systems--socialist and capitalist--in favor of socialism[1]--this at a time when the USSR lay spiritually and economically exhausted, and the United States had an unchallenged monopoly on nuclear weapons, few though there may have been at the time. On the other hand, when examined from the Soviet perspective, this statement appears to represent more than propagandistic exhortation.

The Soviet Union, bearing the brunt of the battle, had defeated the NAZI agressor--the gravest threat to Soviet socialism since the Russian Civil War--and the Soviet Army had occupied most of Eastern Europe. Though it was true the USSR lay economically exhausted, so too did capitalist Western Europe, whose prostration rendered it vulnerable to Soviet domination. Indeed, the capitalist "archfoe" Great Britain had been bled by the war to the point where it had lost its commanding position in the capitalist hierarchy, and had been forced to give up its empire abroad. Therefore in 1947, the world situation appeared quite favorable to the interests of the Soviet Union, especially so since up to that time the USSR had been one of many European powers--now it was preeminent on the continent.

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[1] Deane, op. cit., p. 12.

A problem arises for Western analysts when Soviet leaders make claims like the Zhdanov statement. For they often are expressing a political judgment, but at the same time affirming, in a ritualistic sort of way, the most basic and most easily grasped principle of their political philosophy, the inevitable victory of socialism. This component is an exhortation, not an assessment. For this claim to be anything else, certain conditions would have to be met: (1) the Soviet leadership would have to be prepared to concede sometimes that the global correlation of forces was shifting the other way, toward the "capitalist" enemy; and (2) it would have to concede more than minor internal difficulties (e.g., of an economic or social nature), to which it attaches so much weight in discussing the power of its opponents.

Thus, such statements that Soviet leaders make on the "positive shift" in the global correlation of forces in favor of socialism can be interpreted in several ways. They may be exhortations whose purpose is propagandistic. Or, even if the objective conditions to support the statement are lacking in the Western view, the statement may still reflect a genuine Soviet perception shaped by their own ideology and national experience. Finally, such statements may indeed be accurate assessments of the apparent trend in world affairs.

Addressing the other, "narrow" use of the term "correlation of forces" to encompass regional situations, one encounters a very different circumstance. This is almost certainly a concept that does possess some operational meaning, however imprecise and qualitative an assessment it may provide. All evidence indicates that in dealing with regional or very short-term situations, the Soviet leadership avails itself of specialized expertise in the government and Academy of Sciences to develop forecasts and analyses useful for policy formulation.

As Russian commentators repeatedly stress, "correlation of forces" encompasses more than the "balance of power." "Balance of power" in Western usage tends to be confined to the strictly military aspects of the equation.

This practice stems from the Western military tradition which had customarily operated in a familiar and relatively stable politico-cultural milieu in which wars were decided first and foremost by military power and skill. (In non-Western colonial areas, where the situation was indeed different, the sheer military might of the West has, until recent times, also made it relatively unimportant to calculate other factors.) The Communists, however, being heirs of a revolutionary tradition which for a long time has had to wage war with all sort of weapons except military ones, have developed a more comprehensive concept of what constitutes "force."[1] They incorporate in it such factors as the social and political cohesion of the adversary, his economic power (especially as it bears on the military effort), and such important but subjective factors as morale and will. They also consider the international implications of a given situation. In other words, they take a more comprehensive view of the factors that enter into the calculation of forces than does the Western side. In aiming at such holistic assessments, they are assisted by various regional and functional academic research institutes, whose main raison d'etre is precisely furnishing such data.

In the preceding discussion, the "global: and "regional" usages of "correlation of forces" have been evaluated as concepts according to their utility in the Soviet assessment process. The imprecision of the concept and poor suitability for quantitative analysis suggests that the "correlation of forces," at least in its global usage, is not a fundamental tool in Soviet net assessments. It is, rather, a generalization, employed on suitable occasions to express in a handy and readily understandable way to the Soviet masses or other audiences abroad, the leadership's "conviction" that their policies are successful and events are favoring the USSR.

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[1] In this connection, it is essential to realize that the concept "correlation of forces," as M. Deane points out in his paper, was widely used by Russian radicals both before and and during the revolution in their struggle against the imperial as well as democratic governments of Russia.

It is important to recognize with respect to the Russian concept, correlation of forces (sootnoshenie sil), that aside from the question of its analytical utility or political uses, the concept reflects a peculiarly Soviet world view. The remarkable longevity of this concept from pre-revolutionary times to the present may be thus explained in part by its congruency with the Soviet holistic perspective. As noted above, the correlation of forces is a generalization, encompassing in a holistic manner the spectrum of forces which drive world change. If we briefly examine the philosophical underpinnings of the Soviet weltanschauung, its tendency to look at the world in aggregate terms, and the centrality of the notion of evolutionary change, the concept, correlation of forces assumes a richer meaning.

Evident in public statements of senior CPSU and state officials, as well as open Soviet sources including books and professional journals, is an "organic" view of the world. The Soviets holistic perspective describes the world and global society as a giant organism or system, interrelated and interdependent, in a state of constant evolution and change; propelled by the dialectical process of history. Just as dialectical materialism stresses the interaction of opposites, so the Soviets argue, developments in any part of the world do not take place in a vacuum, but are shaped by an interactive, conflictual process: the "progressive" forces of world socialism versus the "reactionary" forces of "state-monopoly capitalism" or "imperialism." The "correlation of forces" denotes this process at any given stage of development in the global aggregate sense, or within a regional context.

This holistic perspective on the world, reflected in the Soviet's conception of the correlation of forces, has certain consequences. They tend to focus their attention on change, viewing the world or any region in a dynamic and evolutionary context. It thus grants them a future orientation, and the capacity to recognize potential opportunities for extending their influence in periods of fluidity and indeterminacy. The Soviet understanding of the centrality of change disposes them to anticipate it and attempt to manage it, by taking steps in the present so as to shape future world change in paths favorable to Soviet interests. Thus they are the spokesmen for change, rather than defenders of the status quo. These

efforts are supported by a mammoth institutional endeavor at forecasting social change, international relations, and the impact of scientific-technological development.[1]

In direct contrast to the holistic and organic Soviet world view is that of the developed West-mechanistic and reductionist in perspective. In keeping with the traditions of international politics established more than a century ago by the Concert of Europe, is the Western tendency toward overconcern with limited aspects of the dynamic of world change (for example, specific challenges to a given regime are rarely viewed in their larger context-the evolution of world society in general), and the traditional focus on diplomacy and military instruments of state power, such that "balance of power" concepts guide national strategy and foreign policy. Implicit in this concept of "balance" is a systems notion, the interaction of nation states. Yet this concern with "balance of power" lends itself to efforts to maintain the status quo, with reactive and defensive actions. These in turn are exploited by Soviet propaganda in the ideological struggle, pandering to those nations and peoples with the greatest stake in change, whom the world "status quo" penalizes.

Although in the West understanding of the processes of social change has dramatically increased in recent years, particularly with respect to modernization in developing countries, this knowledge has not in general been usefully integrated conceptually with national strategy and foreign policy. The USSR, on the other hand, directs much of its attention to these unconventional realms of interaction, recognizing them as important elements in the "correlation of forces."

The United States still seeks to compete with its principal adversary the USSR, on a global basis in limited and "traditional" spheres of interaction: military and political. The rapid growth of Soviet military capabilities has increasingly circumscribed the potential utility the West might derive from its armed forces, and the Soviet strategy of peaceful coexistence and "detente"

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[1] See R. Soll, A. Zuehlke, R. B. Foster, "The Role of Social Science Research Institutes in the Formulation and Execution of Soviet Foreign Policy," SSC-TN-2625-17 (March 1976) pp. 73-88.

has placed intiative in the diplomatic arena in the hands of the Soviets. With its narrow approach to systemic competition, the United States and its Western allies tend to be outflanked by a Soviet grand strategy executed in multiple arenas which transcend national boundaries and indeed, the traditional instruments of state power.

Western policy clearly needs to be enlightened by a broader perspective. A macro-political view which fully encompasses the global trends and forces excluded by the narrow vision of realpolitik and "balance of power" politics, would not only serve to better identify the challenges posed by Soviet strategy, but also direct attention to those strengths in arenas of competition the West has tended to ignore: technological superiority and economic productivity, and the appeal of the Western democratic-liberal tradition.

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