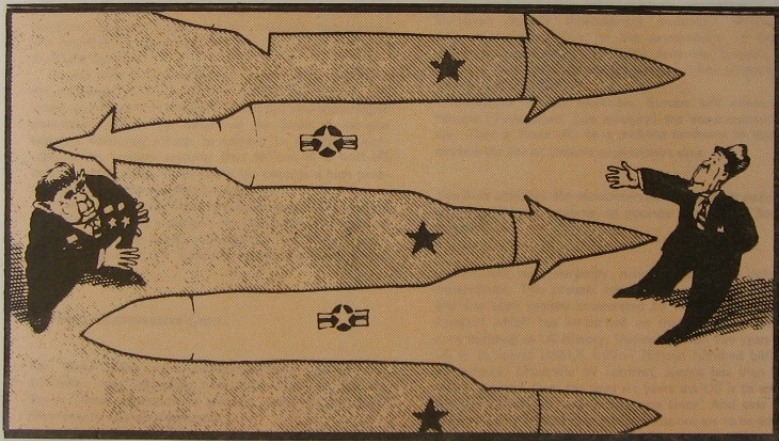


# PEACE DOSSIER 3

## IS THERE A SOVIET THREAT?

Andrew Mack



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A Publication of the Victorian Association for Peace Studies

## Introduction

Since the mid-1970s relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union have deteriorated alarmingly, 'detente' (see glossary) has been pronounced dead, the nuclear arms race is accelerating and, on the US side, increasing stress has been laid on nuclear war-fighting rather than deterrence doctrines (see glossary).

Conservative leaders in Washington, Canberra, London and elsewhere, justify the huge new American military build-up as a regrettable but necessary response to what is perceived as a dangerous and growing Soviet threat both to the West and to the Third World.

In the United States the Soviet threat thesis has been argued most influentially by neo-conservative defence and foreign policy analysts, who existed on the fringes of mainstream politics a decade ago. Today, many of these individuals — coming from organisations such as the Committee for the Present Danger — occupy top decision-making positions in the US foreign policy establishment. Attitudes which would have appeared extremist in the early 1970s, now constitute the conventional wisdoms of the day.

The spectre of the Soviet threat justifies not only the ruinously expensive arms race but also the new American stress on dangerous and destabilising nuclear war-fighting doctrines, and the transfer of the weapons, technologies and methods of repression to right wing governments in the Third World.

In our own region, the new cold war is increasing the militarisation of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Fraser government in Australia shares the neo-conservative assumptions about the nature of the Soviet threat and endorses American efforts to combat it. Australia's contribution to western security thus defined is to host US defence installations. In so doing, we become a high probability target in the event of a nuclear war.

If the Soviet threat thesis is false or grossly exaggerated then the expenses and dangers we face from the escalating arms race may be quite unnecessary. This Peace Dossier examines some of the questions which the Soviet threat debate has raised.

## The Neo-Conservative Case

*For some years now neo-conservatives in the US, Australia and elsewhere have been claiming that the Soviet Union constitutes a growing threat to the West? What exactly is their argument?*

The neo-conservative thesis runs roughly as follows: massive increases in Soviet military capability have pushed the USSR ahead of the US in the strategic (nuclear) arms and the conventional arms race. The Soviet system is inherently expansionist which is why the Western powers had in the past to combine in defensive alliances like NATO and SEATO to contain it. Now, however, Western containment strategy has broken down because of a failure of political will on the part of the US and its western allies. This is clear in the West's refusal to match the huge Soviet military build-up, and in the reluctance of the US in the period since the Vietnam war to carry out its traditional world policeman role in the Third World.

This failure has provided the Soviets with new opportunities to pursue their expansionist aims in the Third World, the neo-conservatives say. The Angolan civil war, of 1975–76, where the Soviet/Cuban backed forces of the MPLA prevailed over the US-backed FNLA/UNITA forces, is seen as the turning point. In the 1970s, Soviet successes

in Vietnam, Angola, South Yemen were followed by further gains in Ethiopia, Kampuchea and Afghanistan. The US appeared an increasingly 'pitiful, helpless giant' with respect to these Soviet gains, but also in its failure to prevent the collapse of its key Third World surrogate policeman — the Shah of Iran — and to rescue the US hostages in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution.

At the strategic (nuclear) level neo-conservatives argue that by the mid-1980s a 'window of vulnerability' will have opened — i.e. the Soviets will have achieved a highly threatening nuclear "first strike capability" (see glossary) against America's land-based missiles. Neo-conservatives also claim that the American nuclear umbrella is no longer a credible deterrent against Soviet aggression in Western Europe.

If America were to resort to nuclear weapons in a European war this could lead to Soviet counter-strikes against the US itself. But the US could scarcely be expected to risk nuclear suicide to try and save France or Germany. So the US deterrent is itself deterred. Strategic nuclear forces are stalemated which means the Soviet conventional superiority assumes increasing importance.

It is further argued that this shift in the balance of power towards the USSR is heading to European 'defeatism' — a revival of the 'better Red than dead' mentality of the 1950s. This defeatism takes concrete expression in the European Nuclear Disarmament movement (END) — and, more importantly, in the susceptibility of North European governments to END's demands. Parallels are drawn with democratic Europe's appeasement of the Nazi Germany before WWII.

Conscious of US weakness, Europe will eventually become 'Finlandised' (see glossary) the neo-conservatives say. That is there will be a growing tendency to accommodate the Soviet Union's expansionist aims.

*You have sketched the neo-conservative case. What policies do its advocates propose to counter the alleged Soviet threat?*

First and most obviously, massive increases in defence expenditure. This process started under President Carter and has been rapidly accelerated by the Reagan Administration which has embarked on the biggest peacetime arms build-up in US history. During the next five years the US is to spend US\$1.5 trillion (fifteen hundred billion) on defence. (Australia by contrast, spends less than five billion a year). Over the next six years the US is to spend US\$222 billion on nuclear weapons alone. And over the next 10 years 17,000 new nuclear weapons are to be added to the present inventory of 30,000 weapons ("tactical" as well as "strategic").

The US is also urging its allies to boost their defence expenditure heavily — though with little real success.

*What will the economic consequence of this huge American arms build-up be?*

Paying the increased defence bill means either raising taxes, cutting public expenditure in non-defence sectors, printing more money or borrowing it. Increasing taxation is the most equitable method, but the Reagan Administration has introduced the biggest tax cuts in US history. Savage cutbacks in other areas of public expenditure, particularly welfare, while having a disastrous effect on the poor, are not sufficient on their own to pay the vastly increased defence bills. Even if it wanted to, the Reagan Administration could not pay its defence bill by simply



printing more money because the government has no direct control over the money supply.

So the government has to finance its deficit by borrowing on already tight commercial markets. With the government competing with the private sector for loan funds, interest rates rise — the US 'prime rate' (see glossary) rose from 6% in early 1977 to over 20% in mid-1981. This has helped push the US economy into an extremely serious recession with disastrously high rates of unemployment, near record levels of bankruptcy and slumping rates of investment.

Because of the international role of the dollar, spiralling interest rates in the US force interest rates up in other countries. The huge US defence increases are thus one cause of the high interest rates on house loans in Australia.

*What are the other foreign policy implications of this American concern with the Soviet threat?*

One of the most important is a change in American nuclear doctrine. For American neo-conservatives a key problem is how to make the nuclear deterrent more credible. Their answer is to make nuclear weapons more *usable*, to raise the possibility of fighting a *limited* nuclear war. Hence the stress on battlefield nuclear weapons — like the so-called neutron bomb.

They also see it as crucially important to make the (Soviet) enemy believe that the US is prepared actually to use its nuclear arsenal if it has to. This explains the many truculent and provocative statements from the Reagan Administration about possible 'limited' nuclear strikes against the Soviets in the event of war in Europe, and the US refusal to make a no-first-use of nuclear weapons declaration.

### The U.S. First Strike

"U.S. and NATO strategy allows for a possible NATO first use of nuclear weapons, if that should prove essential."

Secretary of Defense  
Harold Brown,  
Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1980

"... the policy of the United States has never been entirely to forewarn first strike. The Soviets should be left with at least an uncertainty in their mind as to what is the real possibility — that if the United States is driven hard enough, in various unspecified ways we would indeed respond. That clearly must be the U.S. policy, not to clearly forewarn."

General Lew Allen,  
US Air Force Chief of Staff,  
during hearings of Senate  
Armed Services Committee on  
the Fiscal Year 1980 military budget

*What about the Third World implications of the Reagan doctrine?*

Neo-conservatives see the whole international system, including the Third World, as a battlefield between East and West. As they see it, any gain for one side is a loss for the other. US failures will encourage America's enemies

and discourage her allies. The image of the US as a 'pitiful, helpless giant' has to be purged. Hence the creation of the interventionary Rapid Deployment Force (see glossary); hence the strengthening of relations with virulently anti-Soviet South Africa and repressive ultra-right regimes in Latin America and elsewhere; hence the determination to demonstrate US resolve in situations like El Salvador.

The bogey of the Soviet threat thus justifies the transfers of aid, arms and the technologies of repression to many of the most brutal dictatorships in the Third World.

However, since America's hegemonic power in world politics has declined the US cannot control the Third World as it once could. America's allies are increasingly reluctant to aid and abet Washington's counter-revolutionary adventures in the Third World — even Australia has refused to join the Rapid Deployment Force. Today the US cannot afford either the economic or domestic political costs of massive interventions like that in Vietnam.

In this context resort to so-called Limited Nuclear Options in Third World conflicts becomes a logical, if somewhat desperate, contingency strategy. In contrast to the Vietnam era the US now has precision theatre nuclear weapons and a limited nuclear strike doctrine which rationalises their use. In March 1980, General R.H. Ellis of Strategic Air Command revealed that the US already had contingency plans for limited nuclear strikes against Soviet consular facilities near Iran in response to Soviet *conventional* military activity in the Gulf region. The whole thrust of recent US strategic doctrine has been to make nuclear war-fighting less thinkable — *more usable* and hence, according to many critics, more probable.

*Could you briefly sum up then what you see as the negative consequences of the US response to the claimed Soviet threat?*

First, the massive and economically disastrous increases in defence expenditure. Second, the increased stress on dangerous, destabilising and unnecessary nuclear war-fighting doctrines. Third, the transfer of the weapons and technologies of repression to viciously reactionary military dictatorships in the Third World. Fourth, the increased risk of resort to nuclear weapons in Third World conflicts.

### The Nature of "The Soviet Threat"

*Can we look at the Soviet threat thesis in more detail? President Reagan has explicitly and repeatedly claimed that the Soviets are ahead in the nuclear arms race. Do you deny this?*

Absolutely, and so do most serious analysts. The US has more strategic nuclear weapons than the USSR and they are more accurate, more lethal, more reliable and less vulnerable, than their Soviet counterparts. They are also at a higher level of readiness. The most recent figures (reprinted in *Time*, April 12, 1982) is US 9,480 v USSR 8,040.

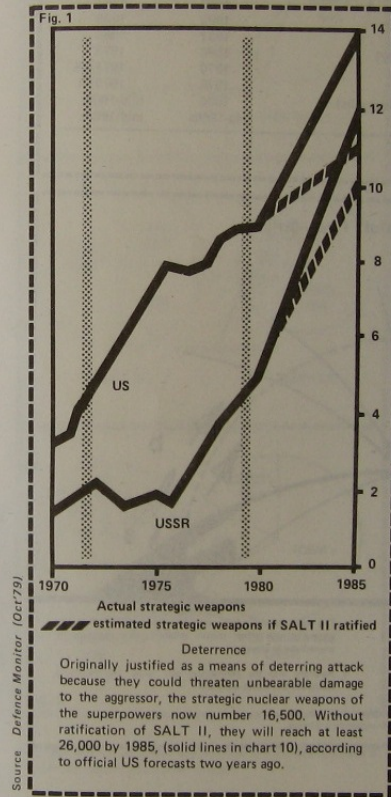
These figures refer to *strategic* warheads — i.e. those mounted on delivery systems — bombers, missiles etc. — with an intercontinental range. The US also have more tactical weapons (around 20,000) than the Soviets. Tactical nuclear weapons are those with a less than intercontinental range — but they may be many times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. See Figure 1.

*But Soviet missiles are bigger with more powerful warheads?*

Quite true. But what is crucial in nuclear war-fighting strategies is the *lethality* of the warhead — its ability to

destroy heavily protected targets. This is a result of accuracy and explosive power. Making a warhead twice as accurate has the same effect as making the bomb eight times as powerful.

US missiles have the edge in accuracy. Theoretically the size of Soviet missiles like the SS18 gives them the capability of packing far more warheads onto each launcher than the US can on its smaller missiles. But the Soviets agreed to limit the number of warheads they deployed in the SALT II agreements (see glossary). The US has refused to ratify these agreements though in general both sides are adhering to their provisions.



*But you can't deny that the Soviets have been gaining on the US in the nuclear numbers race during the 1970s?*

No, of course not. In 1970, the US had about twice as many strategic warheads as the USSR. That gap has narrowed and the two sides are approaching parity. The Soviets have never concealed the fact that they seek nuclear parity with the US, but they deny they are seeking superiority.

The importance of parity is more political than strategic and that goes for both sides. If the Soviets sought superiority why would they have agreed to sign SALT II and why are they abiding by its terms even though the US has refused to ratify the treaty? The nuclear numbers game has become important because both sides have invested it with huge symbolic significance. Nuclear weapons have become international virility symbols. But it is important to remember that at every stage of the nuclear arms race it is the US which has been in front, both in numbers and technological innovation as table 1 shows.

### The "Window of Vulnerability"

*If this is so, why the very considerable alarm in the US about the possibility of a Soviet disarming first strike against US land-based missiles (ICBMs)?*

Neo-conservatives argue that in the next few years an American 'window of vulnerability' will have opened. Soviet missile systems will have achieved sufficient accuracy to knock out all of America's ICBM force.

*Is this true?*

No one knows for sure, but whether it is or not is really irrelevant for the following reasons. First, neither side knows for certain how accurate its missiles will be when fired in anger. Both Soviet and American missiles are tested in an East/west direction. Neither side, for obvious reasons, has test fired missiles on the north/south polar path along which they will travel in war. Deviations in the earth's gravitational field, the effect of jet streams, variations in air density along this untested route could seriously degrade the accuracy of Soviet missiles aimed at the US targets — thus destroying their 'first strike' capabilities. (The latter requires pin point accuracy to 'bust' the heavily protected targets). Secondly there is the problem of 'fratricide' — i.e., the tendency for the first warhead which explodes to generate blast, debris, radiation and/or electromagnetic pulse effects which will destroy or disorient subsequent warheads.

Third, there is the 'launch-on warning' option. Would the Soviets really risk launching an attack against US ICBMs knowing that the US could launch its threatened missiles long before any Soviet missile struck? To conceive that such a Soviet 'threat' has any reality in such circumstances is to enter the world of pure fantasy.

Finally, even if we assume the impossible, i.e. that the Soviets could, with total certainty, destroy ever US ICBM, this would leave at least one third of the strategic bomber force and more than 20 missile submarines totally unscathed. The missiles on just one Poseidon submarine can destroy every large and medium sized city in the Soviet Union. No rational Soviet leadership would ever seriously contemplate such a strike against the US. This much vaunted 'threat' exists only in the fantasies of the scenario-builders, and not in the real world of Soviet policy makers.

*But how can we be sure that the Soviet leadership is rational?*

We can't, but we are totally defenceless against madmen in the nuclear age anyway. Fear of a madman's finger on the trigger is an argument for *disarmament* — not adding 17,000 new nuclear weapons to an inventory which already exceeds 30,000, as the Reagan administration is planning to do.



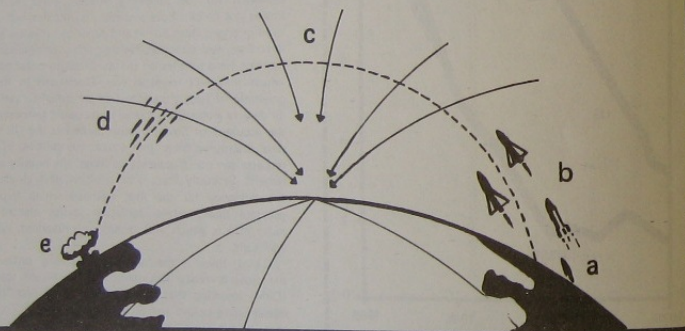
Table 1. Comparative Technological Innovation in Offensive Strategic Weapons

	United States	Soviet Union
Nature of Innovation	1945	1949
Atomic (nuclear explosion)	1948	1955
Intercontinental bomber operational	1951	1953
Hydrogen (thermonuclear) explosion	1954	1955
Deliverable thermonuclear weapon	1954	1958
Nuclear-powered submarine	1958	1957
First test of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) <sup>2</sup>	1960	1959
Operational ICBM	1960	1957
Operational submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM)	1962	1968
Solid propellant ICBM operational	1962	1968
Test of multiple reentry vehicle (MRV) (U.S. deployment 1964)	1968	1973
Test of multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV)	1970	1974/75
ICBM with MIRVs operational	1976	1979(?)
Test of modern long-range cruise missiles (ALCM, SLCM)	1980	mid-1980s
High operational ICBM accuracy (CEP* approximately .15 nautical mile)	mid-1980s	mid-1980s
Antisatellite weapons		

\*Circle of Equal Probability

Fig. 2

## Obstacles To A "Successful" First-Strike



a A very high percentage of Soviet missiles must be fired in perfect sequence and without electronic or computer malfunction. Such an offence has never been tested.

b The thousands of MRV warheads must be accurately released at the correct altitude and velocity.

e Fratricide. No one knows how the explosion of one warhead will affect the trajectory of other incoming warheads.

c The polar magnetic field and other geophysical features or anomalies will affect missile reliability and accuracy in unpredictable ways.

d Re-entry into the atmosphere will "drag" the incoming warheads and affect accuracy.

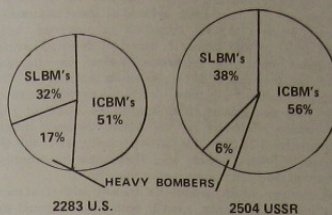
Do the Soviets harbour similar fears about a first strike from the US?

Almost certainly. When the Soviets look at US plans to introduce a whole new range of strategic weapons systems (the MX and Trident II missiles, the cruise missiles, and the 'Stealth' and B1 bombers — plus new developments in

US anti-submarine warfare technology) they must see them as posing a first strike threat against their entire ICBM and submarine forces by the end of the decade. The Soviets, it should be noted, have around three quarters of their strategic nuclear warheads on land — the US only has one fifth. The US has 5,000 warheads on its invulnerable submarines; the Soviets have approximately 1,300 on their noisy and relatively vulnerable submarines.

1980  
COMPOSITION OF U.S. AND SOVIET FORCES

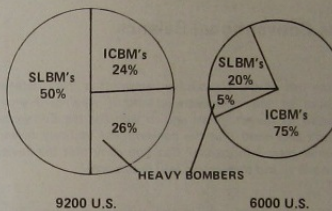
## MISSILE LAUNCHERS AND HEAVY BOMBERS



2283 U.S.

2504 USSR

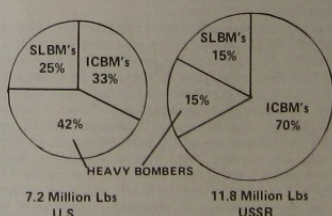
## TOTAL WARHEADS



9200 U.S.

6000 U.S.

## THROW-WEIGHT



7.2 Million Lbs U.S.

11.8 Million Lbs USSR

Fig. 3

But you are not seriously arguing that the Americans plan a first strike against the Soviet Union?

No, but that is what it will seem like to conservative 'worst case' Soviet strategists. They will act to meet the anticipated threat by adding to their nuclear inventories; their reaction will then be taken in Washington as further evidence of Soviet aggressive intentions. This will justify further US build-ups etc. Thus the 'action-reaction' phenomenon leading to what Robert McNamara aptly called 'the mad escalation spiral' of the arms race.

Well, why does the US have around nine and a half thousand warheads?

Good question. Clearly not for a 'city-busting' deterrence doctrine. 1,000 nuclear warheads would do more than suffice for that grisly task. Equally clearly an inventory of 9,500 warheads can have nothing to do with 'limited nuclear war' options. Crudely speaking, the answer is that the numbers have to do with 'damage limitation' strategies. The argument goes like this: If a war is to break out for whatever reason (and the US will not start it) then prudence dictates that the US must limit damage to itself as much as possible. This requires destroying the opponent's means of waging war. For this task, say the strategists, 9,500 strategic warheads are far from excessive even if cities are not targeted at all. Indeed the official US targeting plan lists some 40,000 targets.

Are you saying that the US should not attempt to limit damage to itself?

I am saying that the so-called solution intensifies the alleged problem. The problem with damage limitation strategies is that they only make sense if you strike first. The ultimate damage limitation strategy is a disarming first strike. The pursuit of an effective damage limitation capability is ultimately self-defeating since it stimulates exactly the same behaviour in the opponent. The arms race accelerates, both sides are poorer, neither is more secure.

In contrast to the requirements of the 'mutual assured destruction' (MAD) or deterrence doctrine, damage limitation strategies by their very nature stimulate the arms race. They create ever increasing demands for more weapons — which is precisely why they are so enthusiastically supported by the Military Industrial Complex (see glossary).

You've argued that the Soviets are not ahead of the US in the strategic arms race, but isn't the whole notion of superiority meaningless once each side can destroy the other regardless of who strikes first, i.e. when mutual assured destruction (MAD) conditions prevail?

Yes. Henry Kissinger said in 1974, 'what in the name of God is strategic superiority? What is the significance of it politically, militarily, operationally, at these levels of numbers?' The justification for deploying nearly ten thousand instead of a few hundred nuclear weapons can only be that this gives the US (or USSR) a greater damage-limitation capability. But, as already noted, damage limitation (at least against such targets as missiles, bombers and submarines) means striking first. The urge to strike pre-emptively in crisis situations becomes greater — hence the strategy is acutely destabilising.

But surely increasing nuclear force levels must increase deterrence credibility?

No. There is simply no evidence of any Soviet threat to attack the West. Soviet policy vis-à-vis the West has been marked by great caution since the Cuban missile crisis. It follows that there is no need to embark on the ruinously expensive, dangerous and destabilising nuclear policies now



being implemented by Washington. Reagan's 'solution' constitutes a major part of the problem.

## The European Nuclear Equation

*Could we now turn to tactical nuclear weapons and the medium-range weapons systems (see glossary for definitions) in Europe. Surely the Soviets have a commanding and threatening lead here — especially with the deployment of modern SS-20 missiles?*

The Soviet decision to deploy the highly accurate SS-20 which currently threatens Europe with some 900 warheads was provocative, highly undesirable and unnecessary. Although Moscow claims it has been replacing old missiles (SS-4s and SS-5s), the new missiles have a long range, are highly accurate and carry three warheads. The Soviets do have a clear numerical advantage in ground-launched medium-range missiles but this is only part of the picture. NATO's European nuclear theatre weapons are concentrated fighter-bomber and submarine-missile launch systems. If one looks at the totality of theatre nuclear delivery vehicles (land and submarine-based missile plus bombers) on both sides with a range of 1000 km or more, then the Soviet 'advantage' is much less alarming than claimed by the Reagan administration.

One more important additional point needs making here. While US medium-range fighter bombers can make nuclear strikes against the USSR, Soviet medium-range missiles cannot reach the US. If the US were in a position analogous to the USSR's, US territory would be vulnerable to tactical nuclear strikes from Soviet bases in Mexico, the Caribbean and Canada.

*Does this separation between 'strategic' and 'tactical' nuclear weapons really make sense?*

No. The US has always committed 'strategic' nuclear weapons to the defence of Europe. No serious analysts believe that either side could start using tactical/theatre nuclear weapons without a very high risk of strategic weapons also being involved. Insofar as the nuclear weapons 'balance' means anything at all it is overall weapons totals which must be compared, not sub-totals such as the tactical or theatre balance.

The concept of Soviet theatre nuclear superiority is largely meaningless in strategic terms. Its real importance is political and symbolic. Thus it makes little strategic sense to claim that there is a military 'need' for the US to deploy its controversial cruise and Pershing II missiles in response to Soviet SS-20 deployments.

*How does this debate about theatre nuclear weapons relate to the idea of limited nuclear war?*

Many Europeans, understandably, worry that a 'limited' nuclear war might be fought on European soil and be limited only in the sense that the superpowers which fought it would remain relatively unscathed. There is no doubt that the US sees 'enhanced radiation weapons' (the 'neutron bomb') and other theatre nuclear weapons, as usable weapons. The 'firebreak' between conventional and nuclear weapons has been deliberately eroded by the US.

*But surely it is preferable to have a limited rather than an unlimited nuclear war?*

That sort of question misses the point, which is to avoid both. Limited nuclear war strategies are built on two false assumptions. First, there's the idea that nuclear exchanges can in fact be kept limited. This runs completely counter to the most basic axioms of classical strategic theory, which prescribes escalation to maximum force levels either to gain victory or stave off defeat. Secondly and more importantly, all limited nuclear war strategies must be predicated on a Soviet acceptance of the Pentagon's rules of the game. Clearly the strategy is useless if an American limited strike against the USSR of, say, two missiles might be met by a two thousand missile counter-attack. In fact, the Soviets totally reject the US concept of limited nuclear war. They argue (realistically) that either there is a nuclear war or there isn't.

A strategy which would be fraught with the most appalling risks and costs, even if both sides accepted the rules of the game, becomes suicidally dangerous when one side explicitly rejects them.

## The Conventional Balance

*If the use of the US nuclear deterrent is itself deterred because of the consequences; and if Americans aren't prepared to die en masse and in vain for the Europeans, doesn't this mean that the conventional military balance assumes great importance? Can you deny that the Soviets have a large and threatening lead in this area?*

Yes. The problem with the conventional arms 'bean-counting' exercises is that it is possible to create grossly misleading impressions by selective and biased use of statistics without actually lying. Neo-conservatives do this constantly — so do the Soviets.

For example, neo-conservatives point out that the Soviets have 3.6 million citizens under arms compared with 2.1 million for the US. The Soviets spend far more on defence, they have five combat ships for every one American vessel and so forth. Such statements are true but misleading when taken in isolation. The confrontation in Europe is between Nato and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation (WTO), not simply the US and the USSR. Here the balance of forces is much less alarming. Nato nations, as a whole, deploy more troops and spend more on defence than do the WTO nations. The combat ship numbers 'advantage' referred to by neo-conservatives is strategically meaningless, but it typifies the gross bias of neo-conservative arguments. Once again NATO/WTO comparisons tell a different story. On the WTO side the Soviet fleet is disadvantaged by geography and by ports which freeze up in the winter; its ships are also, on average, smaller and more outdated than NATO's. Overall NATO naval forces are clearly ahead in total firepower and combat capability.

The number of divisions the pact deploys in the crucial central and northern European theatre is 46 compared with NATO's 27. This also sounds alarming. But can the Soviets really count on the reliability of their increasingly restive 'allies' in Eastern Europe — Poland for example? And shouldn't France's divisions be counted in the NATO total even though France isn't a formal alliance member? If you add France's 15 divisions to the NATO total, and subtract Poland's six from the WTO total, the ratio is no longer 46:27 divisions in the latter's favour but 42:40 in NATO's favour.

Overall it's clear that the Soviets and their allies have important advantages in many conventional arms areas, NATO in some others. In general, Soviet/WTO advantages in quantity have been offset by NATO's edge in quality. And it shouldn't be forgotten in overall comparisons that the Soviets deploy a quarter of their armed forces on the Eastern front against China.

Source: *Defense Monitor* (March '80)

### NATO Is Strong

"In the Central Region of Europe, a rough numerical balance exists between the immediately available non-nuclear forces of NATO (including France) and those of the Warsaw Pact."

Defense Secretary Harold Brown  
January 1980

*What conclusions do you draw from this?*

It's essential to remember that when looking at these comparisons, however much we may disagree about relative conventional advantages or disadvantages, the Soviets do not have the 3:1 conventional force ratio advantage which most strategists believe an invading force must have to be sure of victory. In other words, even if we accept neo-conservative assumptions about aggressive Soviet intentions, NATO's conventional force levels are more than sufficient to deter aggression.

*What about Soviet intentions? How do you know that Moscow doesn't harbour aggressive designs on Western Europe?*

Evaluating the real policy intentions of any ruling elite is extremely difficult. Heated scholarly debates still rage over the real motives of US foreign policy. In the case of Soviet foreign policy the task is far more difficult. We have no access, part or present, to the inner councils of Soviet foreign policy decision-making. There are virtually no memoirs of Soviet statesmen to guide us; there is no Soviet archival material open to public scrutiny; no Soviet equivalent of *The Pentagon Papers* revealing the secret deliberations of policy makers, and no judicious leaks from defence bureaucrats to an inquisitive and unshackled press as in the case of the US.

*Does the Soviet Union have an aspiration to spread Soviet influence across the globe?*

Almost certainly. Is the Soviet Union willing to take grave risks to turn such an aspiration into reality by military aggression against Western Europe? Almost certainly not. Instead of asking unanswerable questions about Soviet intentions it is more useful to examine Soviet interests.

*What conceivable interest could Moscow have in attacking Western Europe?*

Currently the Soviets have enormous problems controlling their client states in Eastern Europe — as their brutal actions in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968)

and, most recently, Poland demonstrate. These problems will worsen as Eastern Europe's economic crises intensify. The idea that the Soviets would invade Western Europe and risk nuclear holocaust in order to lumber themselves with the incomparably greater problems of occupying and controlling Western Europe defies both logic and common sense.

The Russians have watched the demise of European colonisation; they were major actors in the demise of Napoleonic and Nazi imperialism. They are well aware that empires collapse when over-extended. This awareness is a major constraint on aggressive expansionism in Europe.

*But how can you say that the Soviets aren't aggressive given their brutal intervention in Eastern Europe?*

The Soviets are clearly a major threat to their allies. What I have argued is that they don't constitute a threat to their ostensible enemies. The interventions you mention were designed to maintain the European status quo, not to change it. They were examples of 'defensive aggression' — clearly aggression against the peoples of the countries invaded, but the strategic purpose of the invasions was defensive vis-a-vis the West. The purpose of intervention was to maintain the pro-Soviet regimes in the cordon of buffer states between the USSR and Western Europe.

*If the Soviets' interests are primarily defensive why have they built up their forces to such a degree?*

The question is too complex to treat adequately here. A proper answer would have to be located in the context of the USSR's wholly understandable obsession with security. The Soviets haven't forgotten that the West intervened militarily against them in the post-revolutionary civil war in Russia, and it is, after all, Russia which has historically been invaded by the West and not vice versa. In World War II the destruction of the Nazi military machine cost some 20 million Soviet lives — compared with less than half a million American losses. The original Sino-Soviet split revived old Soviet fears of encirclement, while the new de-facto alliance between the US and China has generated even greater concern in Moscow.

Second, much — but not all — of the Soviet arms buildup can be explained as a reaction to American military developments. As noted earlier, the Soviets have lagged behind the US at every stage of the strategic arms race.

A prevalent theory in the USSR holds that achieving strategic parity with the US will force Washington to adopt a more realistic approach in dealing with the Soviet Union. The evidence clearly suggests that the Soviets have been prepared to make great economic sacrifices (spending a much larger percentage of their GNP on defence than the US) in order to try and achieve nuclear parity with their rivals. Yet there is no evidence that they seek superiority — whatever that means in the 'over-kill' age.

Third, the arms race in the USSR — and in the US — has become institutionalised in the powerful military industrial complexes of each country.

For the military industrial complex (MIC) in both countries the pursuit of growth in resources devoted to military expenditures is an end in itself, not a means to an end. Conventional defence wisdom sees weapons systems being manufactured to meet evolving threats; students of the MIC see the external 'threats' as rationalisations to justify the procurement of new weapons systems.

The bureaucratic interests of the MIC dictate policies



of increased military expenditure but not war. Generating or exaggerating public and government perceptions external threat serves the growth — maximising imperatives of the MIC admirably; the actual use of force is, by contrast, too fraught with risks and huge potential costs. Insofar as the growth in Soviet defence expenditure is a function of the bureaucratic growth imperatives of the Soviet MIC, it constitutes a severe dislocation of the Soviet economy, but no necessary threat to the rest of us.

Ironically, the MIC's of each side have become each other's objective allies — each using the other's successes to justify demands for increases on *their* side. (The literature on the Soviet and American MIC's is now extensive — some basic references are provided in the bibliography.)

Fourth, the Soviets must work on the assumption that a war with the West *could* involve China. Hence their force levels must be capable of fighting on two fronts simultaneously.

Fifth, Soviet 'worst case' planners must take seriously the possibility that in a war with the West one or more of their reluctant Eastern European allies might refuse to fight or — worse — fight on the other side.

*But some people argue that it's precisely the fact that the Soviets are weak and are likely to grow weaker which makes them dangerous now. It's claimed that Moscow will have to act aggressively abroad in order to deflect attention from the growing problems at home, as imperial powers have done so many times in the past.*

This argument is familiar but hardly compelling. Previous imperialist powers relied on the *successes* of overseas adventures to distract their disaffected subjects. Yet Moscow's major military excursions outside Soviet borders arose because of *failures* in Soviet policy. They aroused almost universal condemnation abroad and certainly weren't welcomed as great victories at home.

*Even if we accept your arguments about Soviet capabilities and intentions, unilateral partial disarmament is surely still far too risky for the West to contemplate seriously?*

Not so. In the pre-nuclear era, arms races had their own brutal logic. All other things being equal, the side with the greatest number of ships, aircraft, guns, tanks, etc., could expect to win. Wars were 'rational', at least in the limited sense that the benefits of victory could outweigh the costs of attaining it. Neither of these conditions apply in the nuclear age.

If the US has the capability of effectively destroying the Soviet Union 20 times over, say, then reducing that 'overkill' capability by, say, a quarter or even a half will not make the US more insecure. The deterrence value of the remaining weapons systems is not any less than the original number. This unique aspect of nuclear weapons makes *unilateral disarmament initiatives* a rational partial alternative to the multilateral negotiations (SALT I and II etc.) which have failed so repeatedly and for reasons which are now quite well understood. Such American initiatives would break the vicious-circle logic of the action-reaction dynamic of the arms race, strengthening the disarmament and arms control forces in the USSR while weakening the credibility of the advocates within the Soviet military-industrial complex.

## The Soviets and the Third World

*You've argued that Soviet interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) have to be understood in terms of Moscow's obsessions with its own security. This argument can't also apply to Soviet activities in Ethiopia or South Yemen or Angola can it?*

No, of course not. There is no doubt that the Soviets seek to expand their influence in the Third World. In this sense they are clearly expansionist. As Roman Kolkowicz puts it, 'such a policy is seen by many Soviets as one of low risks, low costs, and potential high payoffs'.

But we should note that the prime task of the Soviet blue water navy is *not* Third World intervention but countering what the Soviets see as the major threat posed by the US navy — in particular US submarines.

Soviet capabilities *have* expanded in the third World and they continue to expand. Yet they remain modest in comparison to their rivals. Soviet interventionary forces (marines etc.) are weak compared with those of the US. The USSR's amphibious fleet has 1/3 of the US carrying capacity, and Soviet airlift capacity is half America's. Few Soviet transport aircraft or tactical fighters are designed for in-flight refuelling and while the Soviets have 4 aircraft carriers, the US has 14.

Soviet non-military capabilities in the Third World are unimpressive. The USSR provided only 4% of total economic aidflows in 1980, and Soviet trade and investment levels in the Third World are very low compared with those of the West.

At the political level, heavy-handed Russian diplomacy has wasted much of the political capital the Soviets gained as champions of anti-colonialism. Soviet standing in the Third World has deteriorated still further as a consequence of Moscow's brutal invasion of Afghanistan in 1979/80.

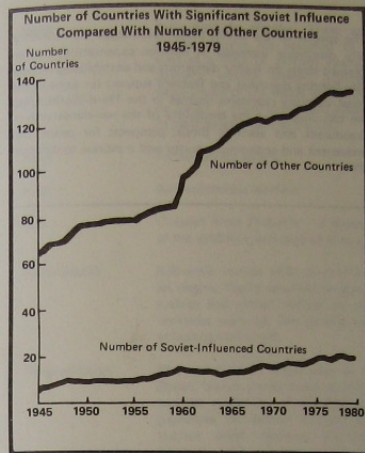
*You can't deny that the Soviets have scored significant gains in the Third World recently — Angola, Ethiopia, Kampuchea, South Yemen, etc?*

Moscow has certainly gained influences in these countries but whether this constitutes 'significant gains' is highly debatable. It should also be remembered that influence is not the same as control. Soviet 'influence' hasn't persuaded the Angolans, Mozambicans or Libyans to give the Soviet full base facilities they sought, and it didn't prevent the Somali and Egyptian governments (among others) from throwing the Soviets out of their countries.

By and large, the Soviets have gained influence in countries which are either strife-torn and/or in economic crisis. Syria, South Yemen, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kampuchea, Vietnam, and to a lesser degree Angola, all fit into one or both of these categories.

Far from being imperial assets the Soviet Union's much-vaunted 'successes' are expensive and politically embarrassing liabilities.

## SOVIET INFLUENCE IN THE WORLD:



Source: Defense Monitor, (Jan 80)

Against these 'successes' must be set the far more significant Soviet losses. The Soviets were kicked out of Egypt, the most powerful Arab state, in 1972; they lost Somalia in 1977 and with it their largest overseas naval facility (at Berbera); in 1979, Iraq — a potential oil superpower — moved decisively to the West. Notable early Soviet 'losses' include Yugoslavia and China. The loss of Algeria and Ghana — two of the key states in Africa — came later as did Indonesia, the most populous state in Asia. We should also note that many of the countries which became Soviet 'successes' only moved towards the Soviet camp after being rebuffed by the West. Examples include, China (1950), Afghanistan in the mid-1950's, Egypt in 1955, Castro's Cuba following the US embargo, and, most recently, Vietnam. Hanoi pleaded for Western aid and investment, and was rejected. Vietnam is now a member of Comecon.

*What of the argument that countries in which the Soviets gain influence will refuse to sell vital raw materials to the West?*

No radical government in the Third World has ever done this — and for good reason. The USSR is self-sufficient in raw materials and as such does not provide an alternative market to the West. Where economic links have been cut between the US and radical governments in the Third World, it's the Americans who have done the cutting.

*Even if the current list of Soviet successes is modest, Soviet capabilities are growing as is Soviet willingness to use them. Surely this poses a future threat?*

First it depends what you mean by 'threat'. All nations seek to expand their influence in the international system. There is nothing intrinsically sinister or improper in this. Second, it's clear that whatever Soviet *Intentions* may be there are powerful economic and political constraints on aggressive Soviet expansionism.

There is little evidence to support the neo-conservative view of a confident, assertive and aggressively expansionist Soviet Union following a masterplan of world domination.

The past successes of major imperial powers — Britain in the 19th century, the US in the post World War II era — have been based on global economic predominance. But the present global correlation of economic forces shows the USSR to be in an extraordinarily weak position. If one compares the GNP of the US, plus Europe, plus Japan with that of the USSR and its Eastern European allies, the ratio is 5 : 1 in the West's favour.

*But surely it's future potential that counts?*

Quite true, but here the prospects are even dimmer for the Soviets. Soviet economic growth and investment rates have both halved since the high point of the late 1960s. The rate of growth of Soviet productivity is also declining rapidly. The Soviets themselves admit severe problems with oil production, a continuing crisis in agriculture and chaos on the railways. If current Soviet military expenditure trends continue — and given the Reagan build-up they are sure to — the defence burden will become even more onerous than it is today.

Eastern European economies have also been plagued by increasingly serious dislocations: inflation, stagnating productivity, growing balance of payments deficits and declining growth rates. And as recent events in Poland forcefully remind us, economic crises are, by definition, also political crises in command economies. Furthermore, as noted above, Soviet 'successes' in the Third World are political and economic liabilities rather than assets.

In other words, the USSR's own legitimization crises, its serious economic decline, its growing problems with its existing empire (Eastern Europe/Afghanistan), and the high costs and low benefits of its influence-seeking policies in the Third World, suggest that the neo-conservative vision of an assertively confident Soviet imperialism bears little relationship to reality.

*One final question. Do you agree with those people who go further than simply arguing that the Soviets don't constitute a threat, and claim that Soviet policy is actually progressive and as such should be supported?*

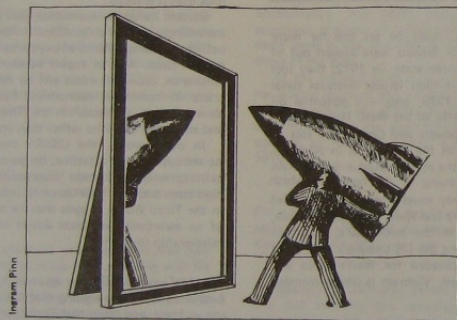
No. The Soviet Union has acted in the past as an arms supplier to Idi Amin's Uganda, Bokassa's Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea, which at the time were the three most vicious regimes in black Africa. When the Soviets were on good terms with the Somali government they aided Eritrean liberation forces fighting the Ethiopian government. Thrown out of Somalia in 1977, the Soviets established closer relations with the repressive and brutal revolutionary regime in Ethiopia. They are now helping to repress the same Eritreans they previously helped. The Soviets also maintain close and cordial relationships with the viciously repressive ultra-right regime in Argentina. No power responsible for such activities — to say nothing of the notorious WWII Nazi/Soviet pact or the brutal invasion of Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan — can seriously be described as progressive.



It doesn't of course follow from this, that America's counter-revolutionary policies in the Third World should be in any way supported. In fact the historical evidence suggests that US support for the most reactionary and repressive regimes in the Third World provides the cynical Soviets with opportunities to exploit situations which they might otherwise have been denied. It is, of course, perfectly understandable that revolutionary movements in societies where peaceful avenues to change are blocked should seek external help wherever they can get it. Western commitment to the regimes which such movements oppose have given revolutionaries few options but to turn to the Soviets, Eastern Europeans or Cubans for the aid they need.

## Conclusion

The spectre of the Soviet threat rationalises the economically disastrous increases in defence expenditure, the increased stress on highly dangerous and destabilising nuclear war-fighting doctrines and Western support for some of the most viciously repressive regimes in the Third World. Until we can undermine the credibility of the neo-conservatives' fraudulent and alarmist thesis, prospects for peace, disarmament and economic security will continue to deteriorate.



		GLOSSARY	
ABM	Anti Ballistic Missiles. These anti-missile missiles are designed to be used as a form of defence against a strategic missile attack. Although deployment of the ABMs was banned by SALT I, there is renewed interest in their deployment in the US.	MIRV	Multiple Independently Targettable Re-entry Vehicle. A multi-warhead missile where each warhead can be separately targeted.
ASM	Air-to-surface missile.	MPLA	Angolan radical nationalist guerrilla group supported by Cuba/USSR in 1975-6 Angolan civil war and recognised by Organisation of African Unity.
ASW	Anti-submarine warfare.	MRBM	Medium-range ballistic missile (a tactical weapon).
CEP	Circular Error Probable — a measure of the probably accuracy of a missile.	Prime rate	The rate of interest given by major banks to their best corporate customers. It is a standard measure of interest rate movements.
Cruise Missile	Sub-sonic missile with air-breathing jet engine, highly accurate navigation system and either nuclear or conventional warhead. Can be ship, land or bomber-launched.	Rapid Deployment Force (RDF)	The RDF is a special interventional force capable of intervening in such 'trouble spots' as the Persian Gulf region. The Rapid Deployment Force will eventually have a complement of 200,000 plus.
'Finlandisation'	Neo-conservatives argue that as the Soviet Union grows more powerful and the credibility of the American guarantee to defend Europe with nuclear arms declines, European countries will become increasingly like Finland. Soviet influence over Finland is considerable — especially in the realm of foreign policy where the Finnish government frequently supports Soviet policy proposals and rarely opposes them.	SALT I and II	SALT stands for Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. These are bilateral negotiations on nuclear arms control between the US and the USSR. Negotiations began in the late 1960s. They have resulted thus far in two major agreements — SALT I signed in 1972, and SALT II signed in 1979 but not ratified by the US. SALT agreements have been criticised for placing certain <i>quantitative</i> limits on the nuclear arms race while actually accelerating <i>qualitative</i> improvements.
First Strike Capability	In this context 'first' strike capability simply means the ability to destroy an opponent's nuclear offensive forces (missiles/bombers etc.) by striking first. A <i>disarming</i> first strike <i>completely</i> destroys the opponent's offensive forces leaving him defenceless.	SAM	Surface-to-air missile
ICBM	Intercontinental ballistic missile — based on land (a strategic weapon).	SLBM	Submarine-launched ballistic missile (a strategic weapon)
IRBM	Intermediate-range ballistic missile (a tactical weapon).	SRAM	Short Range Attack Missile bomber-launched missiles carrying nuclear warheads.
Kiloton (Kt) and Megaton (Mt)	Measures of the explosive yield of a nuclear weapon. A kiloton is equivalent to one thousand tons of TNT (conventional explosive). A megaton is equivalent to a million tons of TNT. The Hiroshima bomb had a 20kt warhead.	'Strategic' and 'tactical' nuclear weapons	The terms 'strategic' and 'tactical' in this context simply refer to the range of the delivery systems (missiles or bombers) on which the nuclear weapons are mounted. A <i>strategic</i> nuclear weapon is one with an intercontinental range. A <i>tactical</i> nuclear weapon is one with a less than intercontinental range. Tactical nuclear weapons range from medium range missiles to battlefield weapons with a range of only a few miles. Tactical weapons include those with both low and high explosive yield.
Military Industrial Complex	A loose coalition of powerful groups which have a vested interest in maximising military expenditure. In the US case the groups include defence corporations, trade unions, the armed services, the civilian defence bureaucracy and legislators whose districts benefit from defence procurement.	Throw-weight	The payload of a missile over any given range.
		UNITA and FNLA	Angolan nationalist guerrilla group supported by US, China and South Africa.

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**PEACE DOSSIER 1: American Bases in Australia**, by Desmond Ball.

**PEACE DOSSIER 2: Why We Have a War to Stop**, by Alan Roberts.

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Printed by Potoroo Press — 489 4274

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