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The Soviet Union and the Politics of Nuclear Weapons in Europe, 1969–87

The Problem of the SS-20

Jonathan Haslam

*Senior Research Fellow in Politics
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**In many ways these questions are more
of politics than of defence, and more
of will than of need.**

**Sir Frank Cooper,
formerly Permanent Under-Secretary,
British Ministry of Defence**

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Preface

On 8 December 1987 the Soviet Union and the United States of America signed an unprecedented treaty 'on the elimination of their intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles', including the Soviet SS-20 and the US Pershing II and Ground-Launched Cruise missiles. There is still no consensus as to why the Russians agreed to such an unusual measure and there is also no agreement as to why they ever deployed the SS-20. At first sight this might seem a matter best left to history. But the story behind the deployment of the SS-20 and the subsequent volte-face also contains the key to understanding the recent dramatic shift in Soviet tactics towards Western Europe.

Deployment of the SS-20 from 1976–77 caused great alarm in Western Europe. If the Russians already had weapons targeting Western Europe, why did they need to deploy a new type of missile? Why were they then apparently indifferent to protests from Western Europe? And what finally caused them not only to cancel further deployments but also to liquidate all remaining SS-20 missiles?

In an unusual if not unprecedented display of *glasnost* the Russians themselves have been asking such questions. Soviet journalist Alexander Bovin raised the issue in *Moscow News* on 8 March 1987 and we have yet to receive a satisfactory answer: 'The building and deployment of hundreds of new missiles in Europe must have cost a huge amount of money. And if we agree to destroy these missiles: Why then were they built? Why were they deployed? It is not only me who is asking these questions. It would be very good to have competent answers to these questions'.

The SS-20 is a Western designation for the Soviet medium-range surface-to-surface nuclear ballistic missile which the Russians designated the RSD-10.¹ We refer to it as an intermediate-range ballistic missile but the Russians have no such label. The term RSD-10 refers to *raketa srednei dal'nosti* (a missile of medium-range). It is a two-stage, mobile, solid-fuel missile which came into service in 1976. Using an inertial guidance system, it can be deployed with either a 650-kiloton nuclear warhead re-entry vehicle system or three independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), each with a 150 kiloton yield. It has a 4000 kilometre range. The missiles were carried

on transporters and therefore mobile, though the transporters were limited in range; support vehicles and large command and control centres moved in train. In time of crisis the transporters may be dispersed to protected launch sites. It is estimated that from such sites the accuracy of the missile is about 750 metres circular error probable: the circumference within which 50 per cent of the warheads are expected to land. The missile would take 15 to 20 minutes to reach targets in Britain.²

Deployment of the missile served as the most effective public justification for the emplacement of US Ground-Launched Cruise and Pershing II missiles in Western Europe from December 1983; a step which the Russians had good cause to regret. So why did they deploy a weapon which ultimately worsened Soviet security? Clearly Soviet leaders miscalculated or, worse still perhaps, failed to make any calculations at all. But what led to the crucial decisions to test and then to deploy the missile? Initial assumptions drawn from the Western press, Western governmental publications and the Western secondary literature (all too often interchangeable) made these questions difficult to answer. *Détente* appeared to be making steady though slow progress in Europe during the mid-1970s. The United States appeared to be holding back on weapons development. The Russians seemed responsive to West European opinion, as demonstrated by concessions on human rights at the European Security Conference in 1975. Soviet defences appeared no more vulnerable to attack than before. Why should the Russians increase the capability of their nuclear forces in Europe?

Such reasoning led some in the West to draw extravagant conclusions. Former US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger condemned 'the wholly unjustified creation and subsequent rapid extension of the SS-20 missile force'.³ William Hyland agreed. As Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the US State Department from 1971 to 1975 and Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs from 1975 to 1977, he speaks with some authority. Hyland claimed the Russians aimed 'to make West European policy subject to a Soviet veto'. In his view the Russians saw the SS-20 as 'the precise instrument of intimidation'. 'Whatever the technical motives for deployment, it also seems likely that the Soviet Union sought to change radically the European balance and the European perception of that balance'.⁴ It is difficult to tell whether he was the privileged beneficiary of accurate intelligence assessments or merely the victim of a fevered imagination.

There is certainly nothing wrong with Hyland's logic. But are the premisses sound? It was because I was dissatisfied with this explanation and because it totally contradicted the explanations of others that I decided to research this subject. But what are the explanations of others and why are they also not entirely convincing? Hitherto they have come in two forms. The one emphasises the apparently inexorable progression of the weapons procurement process. The other focuses on the strategic imperative. But neither encompasses larger political considerations. Both assume that decisions on Soviet defence are divorced from the demands of foreign policy.

First, the focus on weapons procurement: in a polemical antidote to the anti-Soviet hysteria of the late 1970s, Andrew Cockburn assumes that 'the desire for the new weapon or a longer production line comes first; only afterward is the threat discovered that the weapon is supposed to meet'. He therefore deduces that the SS-20 was essentially the means by which a Soviet design bureau salvaged its reputation.⁵ This is not unlike the conclusion of Björn Hagelin who also gives pride of place to the procurement process in the decision to deploy the missile.⁶ This is the interpretation given by no less a figure than Deputy Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union Alexander Bessmertnykh. 'I have the feeling that some decisions were "driven" not so much by political analysis as by . . . the development of technology', he said, citing the SS-20 decision as an example.⁷

The philosophy behind this kind of interpretation is that the arms race has a life of its own. The attractiveness of the interpretation lies in its apparent neutrality. Why look for ulterior political motives? No one is really in control; but Bessmertnykh may have been scoring a point at the expense of the military because he went on to emphasise that 'state interests must determine strategy, strategy as political tactics and, to a certain extent, the technological development of the armed forces'.⁸ The context of the statement appears to be that of a struggle between foreign policy-makers and the military over control of Soviet strategic requirements and in such a war any arguments are ready ammunition. Bessmertnykh's assertion may therefore be only partly true. It should certainly not be taken at face value any more than previous Soviet assertions of a very different nature.

The explanations offered by others such as Raymond Garthoff, David Holloway, Stephen Meyer, Robert Berman and John Baker do assume that there is more to the process, namely strategic require-

ments. Berman and Baker refer to the SS-20 as 'a long overdue follow-on' to the older generation of medium-and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, though 'a major addition to the Soviet regional capability'. In these terms deployment made sense within the framework of US-Soviet strategic competition.⁹ This is also the thrust of Meyer's argument. It is outlined in more detail but with the politics left out.¹⁰ Holloway takes us two steps further in elaborating upon Soviet concern at US forward-based systems, the growing vulnerability of older generations of medium-range weapons, the adoption by NATO of 'flexible response' which put a premium on flexible weapons with quick reaction time and, lastly, the emergence of a threat from China.¹¹ But it is Garthoff who has produced the most comprehensive interpretation so far:

First, there remained a military requirement for strong regional theatre strategic forces, especially in view of the growing British, French and Chinese strategic nuclear missile forces, and powerful American and allied nuclear delivery bomber and fighter-bomber forces based in Europe (and some points on the Eurasian periphery, especially US bases in the Far East) . . . Second, Soviet intermediate-range missile forces needed modernisation . . . Third, it was not advantageous to expand, or even to retain, VRBM [variable-range ballistic missiles] such as the SS-11 and SS-N-6 in theatre strategic roles, since these systems counted against the Soviet intercontinental force levels in SALT and would prevent the Soviet Union from maintaining parity in numbers of launchers under the projected SALT II Treaty . . . Fourth, while the SS-14 and SS-15 had not proved satisfactory, the more successful SS-20 (derived from the SS-16 IRBM) was now available. It would provide mobility, solid fuel, rapid reaction and accuracy . . . The SS-20 decision was, thus, a 'natural'. Moreover it was fully compatible with the SALT negotiations . . . ¹²

There is enough here to refute Weinberger's allegations. But is there enough to meet the thrust of Hyland's objections? The tendency is to focus almost entirely on what Hyland himself calls 'the technical motives for deployment' to the exclusion of larger political motivations. The strategic specialist may well respond: why search for political motives when strategic motives are available? This is a most un-Clausewitzian assumption. If war is a continuation of politics, is it not conceivable that weapons procurement and deployment are also a continuation of politics? Would we really be justified in

assuming that in the era of strategic arms limitation talks and at a time of slowing economic growth in the Soviet Union the testing and deployment of new weapons systems had no political significance and were not subjected to any political scrutiny? Perhaps; but we have no right to assume this to be the case. The presumption that military decisions were made without further reference to political authority or political reasoning has to be proven and not taken as axiomatic. This would not need saying but for the blinkered strategic scholasticism in some quarters which reacts to attempts to introduce political considerations into strategic matters with something of the same discomfort typical of the military. We are, after all, only too likely to take on the biases of those we study: foreign policy specialists disdaining military requirements in the manner of the diplomat and strategic specialists mimicking the military in their disregard for the demands of diplomacy. But whereas in the world outside both diplomats and the military answer to higher political authority with the power to fuse these conflicting elements, academics are by definition answerable to no one. In attempting to fuse the two I may therefore run into trouble from both quarters.

I have had no access to state secrets. But a work of this kind, of course, requires the help of others. Above all I must thank those who read and commented on the manuscript in its entirety: David Holloway (Stanford University), Richard Ullman (Princeton University), Sir Frank Cooper (formerly Permanent Under-Secretary at the British Ministry of Defence), Ambassador James Goodby (US State Department), Matthew Evangelista (Michigan University at Ann Arbor), Robert Davies (Birmingham University), and Lawrence Freedman (King's College, London). Others helped at earlier stages: Harold Brown (formerly US Secretary of Defense), Paul Nitze (US State Department), Lynn Davis (formerly of the US Defense Department), John Barry (currently at *Newsweek*), Raymond Garthoff (Brookings Institution), Laurence Martin (Newcastle University), Sergei Kambalov (Diplomatic Academy at the Soviet Foreign Ministry), Robert Conquest (Hoover Institution, Stanford University), Roger Hansen, the late Robert Osgood, and Robert W. Tucker (School of Advanced International Studies, The John Hopkins University). There are also a number of officials whose names cannot be mentioned. I must also thank librarians at SAIS, the Hoover Institution, Library of Congress and Stanford University who made research easier than it would otherwise have been. Alex Dallin kindly arranged for me to spend 1986–87 at Stanford with limited teaching

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Abbreviations

ALCM	Air-Launched Cruise Missile
APN	Novosti Press Agency
CSCE	Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe
EEC	European Economic Community
FBS	Forward-Based Systems (US)
GDR	German Democratic Republic/East Germany
GLCM	Ground-Launched Cruise Missile
HLG	High-Level Group (NATO)
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
IMEMO	Institute of World Economy and International Relations (Soviet)
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
IRBM	Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile
KGB	Committee of State Security (Soviet)
MIRV	Multiple Independently Targeted Re-entry Vehicle
MRBM	Medium-Range Ballistic Missile
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NPG	Nuclear Planning Group (NATO)
NSC	National Security Council (US)
OSD	Office of Secretary of Defense (US)
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SDI	Strategic Defense Initiative (US)
SLBM	Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile
SLCM	Sea-Launched Cruise Missile
SPD	(West) German Socialist Party
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Talks
TAC	Tactical Air Command (US)
TNF	Theatre Nuclear Forces
USAF	United States Air Force
USAFE	United States Air Force Europe
VRBM	Variable-Range Ballistic Missile
WPC	World Peace Council