By the late 1970s, the disconnect between the U.S. intelligence community's assessments of the Soviet military programs and their actual trajectory became so divorced from reality that the Ford Administration agreed to pursue an independent assessment of Soviet air defense, missile accuracy, and strategic objectives. The "Team B" report changed how the Central Intelligence Agency evaluated the Soviet threat, pointing out pitfalls stemming from mirror-imaging, interpreting data without regard for Soviet cultural and political context, political pressures and consideration, inter-agency rivalry, and the habit of viewing each Soviet weapons' program, or other developments, in isolation from the others. Decades later, some of these analytical pitfalls still continue to permeate U.S. assessments of its adversaries, to the detriment of U.S. national security.

U.S. Department of State, "Intelligence Report of Team B," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Vol. 35, December 1976, select excerpts.[1]

SOVIET STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:
AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW REPORT OF TEAM B NOTE

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The mandate of Team "B" was to take an independent look at the data that go into the preparation of NIE [National Intelligence Estimate] 11–3/8, and on that basis determine whether a good case could be made that Soviet strategic objectives are, in fact, more ambitious and therefore implicitly more threatening to U.S. security than they appear to the authors of the NIEs. […] However, the Team made every endeavor to look objectively at the available evidence and to provide a responsible, non-partisan evaluation.

[…] The Report concentrates on what it is that the Russians are striving for, without trying to assess their chances of success. […]

A certain amount of attention is given to the "track record" of the NIEs' in dealing with Soviet strategic objectives, in some cases going back to the early 1960's. The purpose of these historical analyses is not recrimination, which, given the Team's advantage of hindsight, would be pointless as well as unfair; rather, Team "B" found certain persistent

[1] This report is available at available at https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v35/d171.

flaws in the NIEs that do not disappear with the change of the teams responsible for drafting them. […]

ANNEX: SOVIET STRATEGIC NUCLEAR FORCES AS PERCEIVED BY THE NIEs, 1962–1975: SUMMARY

Team "B" found that the NIE 11–3/8 series through 1975 has substantially misperceived the motivations behind Soviet strategic programs, and thereby tended consistently to underestimate their intensity, scope, and implicit threat.

This misperception has been due in considerable measure to concentration on the so-called hard data, that is data collected by technical means, and the resultant tendency to interpret these data in a manner reflecting basic U.S. concepts while slighting or misinterpreting the large body of "soft" data concerning Soviet strategic concepts. The failure to take into account or accurately to assess such soft data sources has resulted in the NIEs not addressing themselves systematically to the broader political purposes which underlie and explain Soviet strategic objectives. Since, however, the political context cannot be altogether avoided, the drafters of the NIEs have fallen into the habit of injecting into key judgments of the executive summaries impressionistic assessments based on "mirror-imaging," i.e., the attribution to Soviet decision-makers of such forms of behavior as might be expected from their U.S. counterparts under analogous circumstances. This conceptual flaw is perhaps the single gravest cause of the misunderstanding of Soviet strategic objectives found in past and current NIEs.

A fundamental methodological flaw is the imposition on Soviet strategic thinking of a framework of conflicting dichotomies which may make sense in the U.S. context but does not correspond to either Russian doctrine or Russian practice: for example, war vs. peace, confrontations vs. détente, offense vs. defense, strategic vs. peripheral, nuclear vs. conventional, arms limitations vs. arms buildup, and so on. In Soviet thinking, these are complementary or mutually supporting concepts, and they by no means exclude one another.

One effect of "mirror-imaging" is that the NIEs have ignored the fact that Soviet thinking is Clausewitzian in character, that is, that it conceives in terms of "grand strategy" for which military weapons, strategic ones included, represent only one element in a varied arsenal of means of persuasion and coercion, many of them non-military in nature.

Another effect of "mirror-imaging" has been the tendency to misconstrue the manner in which Soviet leaders perceive the utility of those strategic weapons (i.e., strategic nuclear forces) to which the NIEs do specifically address themselves. The drafters of NIE 11–3/8 seem to believe that the Soviet leaders view strategic nuclear weapons much as do their U.S. analogues. Since in the United States nuclear war is generally regarded as an act of

mutual suicide that can be rational only as a deterrent threat, it is assumed that the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] looks at the matter in the same way. The primary concern of Soviet leaders is seen to be the securing of an effective deterrent to protect the Soviet Union from U.S. attack and in accord with the Western concept of deterrence. The NIEs focus on the threat of massive nuclear war with the attendant destruction and ignore the political utility of nuclear forces in assuring compliance with Soviet will; they ignore the fact that by eliminating the political credibility of the U.S. strategic deterrent, the Soviets seek to create an environment in which other instruments of their grand strategy, including overwhelming regional dominance in conventional arms, can better be brought to bear; they fail to acknowledge that the Soviets believe that the best way to paralyze U.S. strategic capabilities is by assuring that the outcome of any nuclear exchange will be as favorable to the Soviet Union as possible; and, finally they ignore the possibility that the Russians seriously believe that if, for whatever reason, deterrence were to fail, they could resort to the use of nuclear weapons to fight and win a war. The NIEs tendency to view deterrence as an alternative to a war-fighting capability rather than as complementary to it, is in the opinion of Team "B", a grave and dangerous flaw in their evaluations of Soviet strategic objectives.

Other manifestations of "mirror-imaging" are the belief that the Russians are anxious to shift the competition with the United States to other than military arenas so as to be able to transfer more resources to the civilian sector; that they entertain only defensive not offensive plans; that their prudence and concern over U.S. reactions are overriding; that their military programs are essentially a reaction to U.S. programs and not self-generated. The NIEs concede that strategic superiority is something the Soviet Union would not spurn if it were attainable; but they also feel (without providing evidence for this critical conclusion) that Russia's leaders regard such superiority as an unrealistic goal and do not actively pursue it.

Analysis of Soviet past and present behavior, combined with what is known of Soviet political and military doctrines, indicates that these judgments are seriously flawed. The evidence suggests that the Soviet leaders are first and foremost offensively rather than defensively minded. They think not in terms of nuclear stability, mutual assured destruction, or strategic sufficiency, but of an effective nuclear war-fighting capability. They believe that the probability of a general nuclear war can be reduced by building up one's own strategic forces, but that it cannot be altogether eliminated, and that therefore one has to be prepared for such a war as if it were unavoidable and be ready to strike first if it appears imminent. There is no evidence that the Soviet leadership is ready, let alone eager, to reduce the military budget in order to raise the country's standard of living. Soviet Russia's habitual caution and sensitivity to U.S. reactions are due less to an inherent prudence than to a realistic assessment of the existing global "correlation of forces;" should this correlation (or the Soviet leaders' perception of it) change in their favor, they could be expected to act with greater confidence and less concern for U.S. sensitivities. In fact, there

are disturbing signs that the latter development is already taking place. Recent evidence of a Soviet willingness to take increased risks (e.g., by threatening unilateral military intervention in the Middle East in October 1973,[2] and supporting the Angola adventure[3]) may well represent harbingers of what lies ahead.

Soviet doctrine, confirmed by the actions of its leadership over many decades has emphasized—and continues to emphasize—two important points: the first is unflagging persistence and patience in using the available means favorably to mold all aspects of the correlation of forces (social, psychological, political, economic and military) so as to strengthen themselves and to weaken any prospective challengers to their power; the second is closely to evaluate the evolving correlation of forces and to act in accordance with that evaluation. When the correlation is unfavorable, the Party should act with great caution and confuse the enemy in order to gain time to take actions necessary to reverse trends in the correlation of forces. When the correlation of forces is favorable, the Party is under positive obligation to take those actions necessary to realize and nail down potential gains, lest the correlation of forces subsequently change to a less favorable position. (It is noteworthy that in recent months one of the major themes emphasized in statements by the Soviet leadership to internal audiences urges the "realization" of the advances brought about by the favorable evolution of forces resulting from détente and the positive shift in the military balance.)

We are impressed by the scope and intensity of Soviet military and related programs (e.g., proliferation and hardening of its command, control and communications network and civil defense). The size and nature of the Soviet effort which involves considerable economic and political costs and risks, if long continued in the face of frustrated economic expectations within their own bloc and the possibility that the West may come to perceive the necessity of reversing current trends before they become irreversible, lead to the possibility of a relatively short term threat cresting, say, in 1980 to 1983, as well as the more obvious long range threat.

The draft NIE's do not appear to take any such shorter range threat seriously and do not indicate that the threat itself, or its possible timing, have been examined with the care which we believe the subject deserves.

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[2] In response to Israel's violations of the United Nations ceasefire resolution ending the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Brezhnevr, on October 24, 1973, sent Nixon a letter threatening unilateral Soviet intervention into the conflict to enforce the ceasefire provisions. "I'll say it straight," he told Nixon, "If you find it impossible to act jointly with us in this matter we should be faced with the necessity urgently to consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally." Brezhnev's letter to Nixon is Document 267 in *Foreign Relations*, 1969–1976, Vol. XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973.

[3] For Soviet involvement in Angola, see Documents 221, 233, 238, 241, and 242 in *Foreign Relations*, 1969–1976, Vol. XVI, Soviet Union, August 1974–December 1976.

Although in the past two years the NIEs have taken a more realistic view of the Soviet military buildup, and even conceded the possibility that its ultimate objective may well exceed the requirements of deterrence, they still incline to play down the Soviet commitment to a war-winning capability. Three additional factors (beside those mentioned above) may account for this attitude:

1. Political pressures and considerations. On some occasions the drafters of NIE display an evident inclination to minimize the Soviet strategic buildup because of its implications for détente, SAL [Strategic Arms Limitation] negotiations, congressional sentiments as well as for certain U.S. forces. This is not to say that any of the judgments which seem to reflect policy support are demonstrably directed judgments: rather they appear to derive mainly from a strong and understandable awareness on the part of the NIE authors of the policy issues at stake.

2. Inter-agency rivalry. Some members of Team "B" feel that the inclination of the NIEs to downplay military threats is in significant measure due to bureaucratic rivalry between the military and civilian intelligence agencies; the latter, being in control of the NIE language, have a reputation for tempering the pessimistic views of military intelligence with more optimistic judgments.

3. The habit of viewing each Soviet weapons' program, or other development, in isolation from the others. The NIEs tend to assess each Soviet development as in and of itself, even when it is evident that the Russians are pursuing a variety of means to attain the same objective. As a result, with each individual development minimized or dismissed as being in itself of no decisive importance, the cumulative effect of the buildup is missed. […]

As concerns the first, Team "B" agreed that all the evidence points to an undeviating Soviet commitment to what is euphemistically called "the worldwide triumph of socialism" but in fact connotes global Soviet hegemony. Soviet actions give no grounds on which to dismiss this objective as rhetorical exhortation, devoid of operative meaning. The risks consequent to the existence of strategic nuclear weapons have not altered this ultimate objective, although they have influenced the strategy employed to pursue it. "Peaceful coexistence" (better known in the West as détente) is a grand strategy adapted to the age of nuclear weapons. It entails a twin thrust: (1) stress on all sorts of political, economic, ideological, and other non-military instrumentalities to penetrate and weaken the "capitalist" zone, while at the same time strengthening Russia's hold on the "socialist" camp; and (2) an intense military buildup in nuclear as well as conventional forces of all sorts, not moderated either by the West's self-imposed restraints or by SALT [Strategic Arms Limitation Talks].

In its relations with the United States, which it views as the central bastion of the enemy camp, the Soviet leadership has had as its main intermediate goals America's isolation from

its allies as well as the separation of the OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] nations from the Third World, which, it believes, will severely undermine "capitalism's" political, economic, and ultimately, military might.

With regard to China, while the spectre of a two-front war and intense ideological competition have to an important degree limited the Soviet Union's freedom of action in pursuance of their goals against the West, it has not proved an unlimited or insuperable limitation. Further, given current trends in the growth of Soviet military power, the U.S. cannot confidently anticipate that concern with China will deter the USSR from increasingly aggressive policies toward the West.

As concerns the more narrowly defined military strategic objectives, Team "B" feels the USSR *strives for effective strategic superiority in all the branches of the military, nuclear forces included*. For historic reasons, as well as for reasons inherent in the Soviet system, the Soviet leadership places unusual reliance on coercion as a regular instrument of policy at home as well as abroad. It likes to have a great deal of coercive capability at its disposal at all times, and it likes for it to come in a rich mix so that it can be optimally structured for any contingency that may arise. After some apparent division of opinion intermittently in the 1960's, the Soviet leadership seems to have concluded that nuclear war could be fought and won. The scope and vigor of Soviet strategic programs leave little reasonable doubt that Soviet leaders are indeed determined to achieve the maximum possible measure of strategic superiority over the U.S. Their military doctrine is measured not in Western terms of assured destruction but in those of a war-fighting and war-winning capability, it also posits a clear and substantial Soviet predominance following a general nuclear conflict. We believe that the Russians place a high priority on the attainment of such a capability and that they may feel that it is within their grasp. If, however, that capability should not prove attainable, they intend to secure so substantial a nuclear war-fighting advantage that, as a last resort, they would be less deterred than we from initiating the use of nuclear weapons. In this context, both détente and SALT are seen by Soviet leaders not as cooperative efforts to ensure global peace, but as means more effectively to compete with the United States. […]