

alternative interpretations, illustrating how the possibilities for Confidence-Building can shift with the interpretation of the Soviet situation.

To make this necessarily complex point clearer, consider the image of Soviet conventional military capabilities presented earlier. If the Soviet Union *does* possess, more-or-less, the capabilities and doctrines outlined above – and it seems increasingly difficult to deny that it does – but *doesn't* have clearly aggressive and offensive intentions, how else can the very aggressive forces and plans be explained? More important for the purposes of this study, what consequences would such alternative (potentially more benign) explanations have for the prospects of Confidence-Building?

Properly, such intriguing and important questions should receive detailed consideration. A more thorough analysis of this aspect of Confidence-Building would surely need to explore the widest possible range of alternative explanations for Soviet and Warsaw Treaty Organization military policy developments. For our purposes, however, the brief examination of two more alternative perspectives may better illustrate the point of this section.

While not questioning in the least the very clear and effective modernization of Soviet conventional forces and their increasing convergence with a conventional doctrine possessing a decidedly offensive tone, Joshua Epstein suggests that these developments may have a counter-intuitive cause. Rather than reflecting a deliberate *preference* for pre-emption *per se*, Epstein suggests that the current Soviet conventional posture is an accommodation to intrinsic Soviet military weaknesses.

Apparently unconvinced by the simple numerical comparisons and static assessments prevalent in the West, the Soviets themselves express profound dissatisfaction with many aspects of their forces, and with the drawbacks of ever-advancing technology – drawbacks as severe as in the (“gold-plated”) American case. *Indeed, seen in the light of the Soviets' own sharp self-criticism, the primacy of the offensive, in doctrine and capabilities, emerges as a rational accommodation to their most critical military shortcoming: inflexibility.* Far from making the Soviets less dangerous, however, that very

deficiency makes them, if anything, *more* dangerous by creating strong pre-emptive inclinations.⁸⁴

Epstein, in his analysis, refers to a wide range of self-criticism drawn from the Soviet military literature. This literature contains frequent complaints about the lack of flexibility produced by Soviet military training and, generally speaking, despairs of ever correcting it. The chief culprit responsible for this institutional inflexibility appears to be the military incentive system which creates tremendous pressures to severely simplify or distort exercises in order to ensure “good scores”. This is apparently so endemic that the traditional Soviet military tendency toward rigidity is seriously exaggerated. While senior Soviet military decision makers appreciate the great and increasing importance of “flexibility, initiative, and the capacity for creative decisionmaking in the face of uncertainty”, they also appear to realize that their present forces are plagued by many operational limitations.

These operational limitations create certain incentives. In particular, once convinced that war with NATO was unavoidable, the Soviets would have strong incentive to apply a maximum of force with as little warning as possible. ... As long as the Soviets lack flexibility, they will have every reason to avoid that necessity. The operation that minimizes the likelihood of its arising is precisely the “surprise” and “massive” attack suggested by Soviet doctrine. ... A successful pre-emption nips uncertainty in the bud. It obviates the need for great flexibility by overwhelming the adversary before he can generate the unexpected counter, thus precluding any need to diverge from the predetermined plan or the routinized mission.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Joshua Epstein, “On Conventional Deterrence in Europe: Questions of Soviet Confidence,” *ORBIS*, vol. 26, no. 1, p. 72. First emphasis added.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82. However, Epstein notes a counter point: “the very problems that make a crushing pre-emption so attractive also make it highly risky for the Soviets to attack without prior mobilization” because they would be uncertain about the readiness of their own standing forces (p. 83).

