

Soviet Nuclear Strategy during the Cold War: A Realist Perspective

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Abstract: *A deep ideological conflict that was latent but manifested in indirect conflicts in the areas strategically important to two major powers and an arms race marked the global political landscape in the era of what the world calls the "Cold War". Formulating and executing nuclear strategies was a significant factor in this conflict. The Soviet nuclear strategy, which evolved and altered with time according to the security threat its competitor posed, can be analyzed from the theoretical perspective of realism. This paper analyses the nature and evolution of the Soviet nuclear strategy by comparing the empirical manifestation of nuclear strategy in different periods with the tenets of this theoretical perspective. By scrutinizing the persistent and alternating themes in the evolution of Soviet nuclear strategy, this paper critically examines them with a lens that focuses on the survival and security of the state in an anarchical structure of international relations.*

Keywords: Nuclear Strategy, Arms Control, Anarchical Structure, Security Dilemma

Introduction

Two wartime allies, the United States and the Soviet Union, engaged in intense ideological, political, and military conflict throughout this period, from the end of World War II in 1945 to the disintegration of the latter in 1991. At the core of this conflict was the race for nuclear weapons, which was the primary means by which both superpowers sought to assert their dominance and ensure their survival. Over the years, the Soviet Union, the United States' principal adversary, developed a complex and frequently unclear nuclear Strategy in response. The policymakers and academia interpret the nature as well as the realities of international relations with a specific theoretical perspective to thoroughly understand the dynamics as well as the ontological nature of nuclear strategy, which a country formulates for its nuclear capability in the broader context of security, realism offers a better lens of analysis and an interpretive framework. The foundational tenets of realism, such as rationality, security, survival, and anarchy, can only be substantiated empirically when a state prefers its security and the promotion of its interest above all else. This can be done with an increase in military power, and the ultimate guarantee can be ensured only by developing nuclear weapons and an assured second-strike capability. Consequently, for a thorough insight into the global political landscape and the order governing it, there emerges a need to analyze the emergence and evolution of nuclear strategic thought of both the states involved in that conflict. That analysis must include the development of nuclear strategy as well as the changes that it has undergone with time and the specific events when the nuclear-armed powers threatened each other's survival and the survival of the globe.

This paper analyzes and explains the emergence and evolution of the Soviet Union's nuclear strategy in its all-encompassing competition with the United States. Scrutinizing the fundamental tenets of this perspective, e.g. Balance of Power, Anarchic Structure, etc., it offers a very different perspective on the exploration of the causes that shaped and influenced the actions and responses of the Soviet Union. This can also explain the reasons for the development and sustenance of such heavy nuclear power by the country and the reason for its application in diplomatic and military strategies. The significance of security and power in determining its actions, as well as the peculiar theoretical lens that upholds the rationality

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of the state in the context of anarchical structure, makes this perspective very useful. The primacy of national security in policy is what can ensure it in the practical world. These were the reasons that led the Soviet Union to keep its border safe from external threats and ensure establishing and maintaining a balance of power, consequently shaping and influencing its nuclear strategic culture (Sagan, [1993](#)). That strategy, though, was flexible enough to evolve in a manner that takes into account novel developments in technology and the broader geo-political context. This study brings to light the dynamics of security at the international level by contrasting the nuclear strategies of both countries during the intense struggle for global dominance and the implications they can bring to the overall nuclear strategic posture.

The Historical Background of the Soviet Nuclear Strategy

The early years of the Cold War from 1945 to 1962 were marked by the soviet pursuit of nuclear parity. The arrival of the U.S. as the sole nuclear power right after the Second World War left the Soviet Union with a huge imbalance of power. The unavoidable factor of anarchy, the threat of the U.S. intervention in its sphere of influence, and the threat of direct aggression convinced the soviet leader of the utmost importance to build nuclear weapons, the significance of which realism endorsed. Making quick progress in the development and the increase in its stockpile, the country was able to test its first nuclear device in 1949.

The concepts of massive retaliation and enormous retribution had a huge impact on the nuclear strategy of both countries as the U.S. aimed to contain soviet expansionism by nuclear monopoly. This was one of the reasons why the latter remained defensive in its posture in the early years. This was countered when the Soviet Union arrived with an assured second-strike capability. The year 1962 materialized those conceptions of nuclear strategies that will be considered for policy approaches and nuclear postures by the two conflicting parties (Allison, [1971](#)).

In later years, the novel concepts of mutually assured destruction dominated nuclear discourse and strategic thought of the time. Realizing the catastrophic consequences an unrestrained arms race could lead to with a manifested crisis of 1962, both states altered their nuclear strategies.

The strategic parity that was pursued by the Soviet Union was established by the priority it gave to the submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) in line with the realist theoretical perspective. The formalization of treaties like SALT I and SALT II was ensured to maintain that strategic balance as well as not to indulge in an unrestrained arms race. The need to manage and restrain nuclear escalation, a categorical behavior was made possible by the transition of the American strategy of massive retaliation to a flexible response. That involved the emergence of MAD as a concept and a feared potential reality. This concept reflected the rationality of the actors and the pragmatism endorsed and outlined by the realist perspective. The arms race continued between both parties besides the formalization of many treaties of arms control due to the security dilemma each conceptualized and politicized. This, too, provides the empirical substantiation of another important tenet of this perspective, which states that the measures of security of one state may always lead to insecurity in the others, which is termed a Security dilemma (Jervis, [1984](#)).

Numerous technical developments and a strategic reevaluation by the main rivals were brought about during the late Cold War (1980–1991). Significant technical developments and changes in geopolitical dynamics occurred during this time. Under leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev and Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Union had to reevaluate its nuclear policy due to growing economic difficulties. Despite financial limitations, the deployment of cutting-edge weaponry like MIRVs (Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles) sought to preserve strategic parity with the US.

Under the Reagan administration, on the other hand, the United States took a more assertive nuclear stance, focusing on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also referred to as "Star Wars." The goal of SDI was to challenge MAD's reasoning by creating missile defence systems that would jeopardize the Soviet deterrent capability. This change was seen by realists as an effort to regain control of the power dynamics. The Soviet Union's strategic compromises during weapons reduction negotiations and the subsequent breakdown of the Cold War bipolarity were influenced by its eventual incapacity to support the economic weight of the arms race (Freedman, [2003](#)).

The Soviet and American nuclear strategies were influenced by opposing ideological systems, but when we compare the divergent and convergent strategies, we find that, as a result of the limitations of the international system, their strategic goals showed a great deal of convergence. The goals of both superpowers were to display might, preserve the balance of power, and discourage violence. However, the American approach was more proactive, aiming to use economic and technical advantages to control the terms of the nuclear arms race, while the Soviet policy was often reactive, influenced by American breakthroughs and efforts. For instance, the Soviet Union mostly followed a counter-value strategy, prioritizing deterrence over preemption, whereas the United States adopted first-strike capabilities and counterforce targeting in the 1970s and 1980s. Different perspectives of reality were highlighted by the Soviet Union's emphasis on survival and the United States' dominance. Despite these differences, the final recognition of common vulnerability highlighted the necessity of deterrence in both strategies, bolstering the realist assertion that governments act to optimize security in uncertain circumstances.

This Study analyzes the complex interplay of multiple factors that shaped and influenced the nuclear strategies of both superpowers in the Cold War. By examining these dynamics from a realistic standpoint, the article provides significant insights into the ongoing importance of nuclear policy in maintaining international security.

Literature Review

The study of Soviet nuclear strategy during the Cold War is intimately related to the theoretical framework of realism in international relations, which underlines the significance of state security, power, and survival in anarchic international systems. Soviet nuclear strategy has been the subject of extensive scholarly examination as part of the Cold War's nuclear arms race. This analysis mainly examines the Soviet approach through the lenses of power balance, deterrence theory, and the desire for security in the face of perceived threats. According to realism, as described by scholars such as Kenneth Waltz (Waltz, [1979](#)), states seek security and survival by increasing strength, and in the case of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons were important to this goal. With an emphasis on the realism viewpoint and its repercussions, this literature study will analyze major publications that have affected our understanding of Soviet nuclear strategy.

Understanding how both superpowers, particularly the Soviet Union, used the fear of nuclear retaliation to avoid direct military combat necessitated an understanding of the concept of deterrence, which was established by scholars such as Bernard Brodie in 1946 (Earle, [1946](#)) and Thomas Schelling in [1966](#) (Lebow, [1996](#)). Nuclear weapons were the ultimate security guarantee that was attained by the Soviet Union when it was assured second-strike capability. This strategic stability was founded on the idea of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which first appeared in the 1960s. Similar to the United States, the Soviet Union recognized that a nuclear war would lead to the destruction of both sides, creating a stable deterrent balance (Schelling, [1966](#)).

Although the foundation was established by these early theoretical works, later studies have explicitly looked at how these concepts applied to Soviet nuclear strategy. Realist views of the international order, according to scholars like Kenneth Waltz and John Lewis Gaddis, influenced the Soviet Union's nuclear policy. The Soviet leadership saw nuclear weapons as a way to ensure strategic security and survival in a world where American military dominance predominated, not as an ideological instrument. According to academics like Mueller, the Soviet Union's original nuclear policy was focused on attaining nuclear parity with the US. To balance the American arsenal, atomic and, subsequently, thermonuclear weapons were developed. This was in line with Robert Jervis's security dilemma, which holds that an endeavor by one state to defend itself may leave another state insecure. Recent research has reinforced the idea that the Soviet Union's nuclear policy throughout the 1950s and 1960s was driven by the desire to ensure that the Soviet Union could respond even in the case of a first strike. R. L. Garthoff and John Mueller argue that the weapons race was less about ideological rivalry and more about maintaining a balance of terror and attaining nuclear parity. In an attempt to close the technical gap with the United States, the Soviets created a diverse nuclear arsenal that included ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and bombers that could carry nuclear payloads (Garthoff, [1994](#), pp. 225–230).

A key component of Soviet nuclear strategy has been the study of weapons control and the role of strategic stability. Realism does not support governments pursuing armed conflict alone, even as it recognizes that countries frequently employ diplomacy to strengthen relations and avert war. A nuanced view of the Soviet Union's nuclear strategy may be gained from its role in weapons control, especially throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) are two significant examples of Soviet diplomacy that aimed to lessen the possibility of nuclear war while maintaining a credible deterrent (SIPRI, 2018). Scholars like Garthoff (2004) and Schelling (1966) claim that the motivation for arms control agreements was a shared understanding of the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear conflict and a desire to reduce the likelihood of an unintended conflict. However, from a realist perspective, arms control was not a sign of goodwill or cooperation but rather a deliberate step to ensure that nuclear weapons were managed in a way that maintained the balance of power.

According to Sagan, the SALT and INF negotiations were less about disarmament and more about ensuring that both superpowers adhered to a set of established rules that prevented the nuclear arms race from spiralling out of control while ensuring each side had the sufficient military power to secure its existence. The expanding corpus of research on Soviet nuclear strategy now includes reinterpretations of deterrence theory and the rationale for Soviet actions. The claim can be very plausible that the need to communicate to the US the seriousness of Soviet commitment in the event of a conflict and the desire to avoid nuclear war drove Soviet decision-making. As Haglund argues, the Soviet Union's strategic thinking was more about "shaping perceptions" and making sure the United States recognized that the Soviet Union was capable and ready to react to aggression with devastating force, even if MAD theory indicates an equilibrium of mutual deterrence (Haglund, 2004). This is in line with realism's emphasis on the value of power and the strategic use of force to exert influence and deterrence. In addition, the analysis of Soviet nuclear strategy has increasingly focused on internal politics and leadership dynamics. Works such as K. B. Payne demonstrate the influence of political and military leaders on the development of Soviet nuclear strategy.

The personal ideological and military traits of Soviet leaders like Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev, as well as the complex interactions between military bureaucracy and civilian leadership, greatly influenced nuclear policy. This contributes significantly to the realist account of state conduct by showing how internal factors, such as the need to maintain political legitimacy and military control, influenced the Soviet Union's approach to nuclear strategy.

This paper will employ the realism theory of international relations to assess Soviet nuclear policy throughout the Cold War. In addition to critically analyzing how these concepts impacted Soviet nuclear policy and strategy, the methodology will systematically analyze each of the core tenets of realism, such as the anarchic international system, state centrism, the pursuit of power and security, rational decision-making, and the balance of power. This sequential analysis will focus on one realism assumption at a time, examining both the theoretical foundations of each premise and how they related to Soviet decisions and actions throughout the Cold War. The study will investigate primary sources, historical records, and secondary literature to give a comprehensive picture of Soviet nuclear strategy and evaluate the extent to which Soviet behaviors aligned or deviated from the predictions of realism theory. This method will ensure a coherent and well-structured analysis, contributing to our understanding of Cold War geopolitics while also providing insights into the strategic rationale for Soviet nuclear policy.

The International Anarchic System

Realist theory holds that because the international system is inherently anarchic, no higher authority can regulate the state conduct. In the lack of global authority, states are compelled to rely on their security measures, which frequently leads to competition, conflict, and the consolidation of power. The concept of anarchy influenced nuclear strategic thought in the same manner as other tenets, but the significance of this factor can be observed in the bipolar order of global politics and the potential success of one or other parties in monopolizing that order. The Second World War led to an international political vacuum as the disintegration of the old power centres rendered only the U.S. and USSR major military, political, and

economic powers. The absence of overarching authority to regulate the relationship between these two states compels them to dominate their respective sphere of influence and to fight for global dominance.

The monopoly of the U.S. in the nuclear domain was considered as an existential threat to the security of the Soviet Union. That was itself another empirical substantiation of a major tenet of realist theory. This can lead to a logical conclusion that the Soviets strived for the development of nuclear weapons, and the establishment of strategic parity was essentially the consequence of a perceived threat in the context of the monopoly its adversary had. The Soviet leadership believed that nuclear weapons were the best deterrent, guaranteeing the state's existence by making any hostile actions by the United States too expensive to consider. The realist view that a state's military might, especially its nuclear arsenal, was crucial to its security and sovereignty in a world without international governance served as the foundation for this strategic reasoning, as argued by John Gaddis (Gaddis, 2005).

State-Centrism

State-centrism, which holds that states are the main players in international affairs and that their actions are motivated by national interests, especially the need to survive, is another aspect of realism that is emphasized. Therefore, the Soviet Union's nuclear policy must be seen as a reaction to its need to protect national interests, namely its survival, in a world ruled by a formidable enemy of the United States. From the realist perspective, nations prioritize their security and will take whatever necessary steps to maintain it (Mearsheimer, 2003).

The Soviet Union saw nuclear weapons as a means of projecting influence and influencing world politics in addition to serving as a deterrence against foreign attack. To achieve parity in the arms race and guarantee the Soviet Union's deterrent capacity, the Soviet Union developed the triad of nuclear weapons—land-based missiles, submarine-launched missiles, and strategic bombers—in direct reaction to the nuclear capabilities of the United States.

The decision-making process of the Soviet leadership is characterized by a state-centric approach, especially in times of crisis like the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis demonstrated the extent to which the Soviet Union would go to maintain its nuclear weapons status and ensure its continued existence in the face of American domination. To strengthen its nuclear deterrent capabilities, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev approved the stationing of nuclear missiles in Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis as a countermeasure to American missiles in Turkey. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union's foreign policy was heavily influenced by its view that nuclear weapons were essential to its security and place in the world order.

The Drive for Nuclear Deterrence in the Pursuit of Power and Security

The fundamental tenet of realist theory is that governments want to amass power to secure their borders. In anarchic systems, the quest for power determines a state's strategic choices and is essential to its existence. The Soviet Union's pursuit of power and security was closely linked to the development of nuclear weapons. The United States, which had established a nuclear monopoly after the 1945 atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, held an edge over the Soviet Union in the early phases of the Cold War. A major turning point was the Soviet Union's first successful nuclear test in 1949, which told the world that the country had achieved nuclear parity and could no longer be disregarded on the international scene (Sagan, 1993).

A key element of Soviet national security policy, the buildup of the Soviet nuclear arsenal went beyond just matching American nuclear capabilities. According to George Kennan (1947), the Soviet Union saw the United States as its primary geopolitical adversary, and as such, nuclear weapons were seen as an essential means of maintaining its power and security in the face of a feared existential danger. The Soviet Union's view that the United States could only be dissuaded from attacking by the credible threat of devastating retaliation is reflected in the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which dominated much of the Cold War nuclear rhetoric. The development of nuclear weapons was a logical solution to the security conundrum that existed in the international order, as both superpowers attempted to secure their existence by amassing nuclear might. It was not only an arms race.

Rationality of the State

According to realism, states are logical beings that base their actions on pursuing their interests, particularly those of power and security. The Soviet Union's decision-making process, both in terms of military strategy and diplomacy, demonstrates the rationale of its nuclear policy. The Soviet leadership's responses to U.S. initiatives, such as NATO's formation and the stationing of nuclear weapons in Turkey, show a pattern of rational decision-making intended to maximize Soviet security while reducing risks (Kissinger, [1994](#)). The Soviet Union's involvement in arms control talks further demonstrated the logic of its nuclear policy. The Two treaties of INF and SALT are two among the many examples of the substantiation of the realist principle of the rationality of the state in decision-making that sought to regulate the arms race and reduce the likelihood of a nuclear conflict while simultaneously ensuring the maintenance and credibility of Deterrence (Lebow, [1981](#)).

Nuclear Parity and the Strategy of the Balance of Power

Another important tent of realist theory is the concept of balance of power. This entails that the states must not let any single state dominate all and achieve hegemony. If this happens, it would be a threat to the sovereignty of all. The possession of nuclear weapons was very important for the Soviet Union to ensure the fulfilment of this particular parameter of the equation of balance. Two of the conflicting parties engaged in an arms race in order not to let any opportunity to the disparity. The possibility emerges that the arms race is a struggle for balance to avoid any destabilizing leads.

Under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union invented the bomb, while under his successors like Brezhnev, etc. managed to build a credible deterrent. This was done by the development of an assured second-strike capability and a credible threat. The aim was to prevent the US from having a strategic edge in this race. The achievement of this balance of power was important in nuclear strategy because the Soviet willingness simultaneously to negotiate arms control agreements and invest highly in defence initiatives demonstrated it.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the nuclear strategy of the Soviet Union during the Cold War according to the theoretical perspective of Realism. This also highlighted the major tenets of this theory from which the strategy was influenced. This has also contributed to the literature by improving academic acquaintance with the logic of decision-making on the strategic level in the anarchic structure of international relations where the states must seek to promote their security and ensure their survival. A good illustration of the realist idea of state-centrism is the Soviet Union's focus on its national interests, especially survival, which influenced its nuclear decisions. With the Soviet Union seeking to develop a potent nuclear deterrent to prevent any hegemonic dominance by the United States, the research also bolstered the idea that nuclear weapons were a way to preserve the balance of power. Additionally, the study demonstrated how the Soviet leadership logically sought nuclear capabilities as a means of ensuring security, preserving geopolitical power, and avoiding the escalation into a full-scale nuclear conflict—rather than only as an ideological instrument.

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