The title of this article is taken from *Military power and political influence*, an Adelphi Paper by John Vincent published in the autumn of 1975.1 I read it when I was just starting my own apprenticeship at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, where John had been two years earlier. I was convinced that I would not be taken seriously until I had learnt to compare and contrast American and Soviet missiles in excruciating and acronym-laden detail. Reading John’s paper was both a relief and a liberation. It was a relief because of its elegant and clear prose, which stood out against the presumption that serious strategic analysis required a declaration of war on the English language. It was a liberation because it rekindled within me a suppressed conviction that the task of strategic analysis was not only to explore the quality of available military means, and the concepts that governed their use, but also to examine the political purposes they were expected to serve. I had not met John, who was by then in Australia, when I read this paper. Once I had finished it I could not wait to do so.

The topic takes us directly into an area where John always liked to go—the central arena for the study of international relations, where ‘realists’ insist on the centrality of armed force against ‘idealists’ claims for its essential irrelevance and potential transcendence, and where weary admonitions on the need to adapt to a brutish anarchy compete with anxious demands to work towards a more civilized community. In this arena a hot topic since the end of the Cold War has been whether trends in international society at last support idealist aspirations and, in consequence, a diminished role for organized violence.

The arrival of a ‘unipolar world’ has removed the most obvious precondition for another Great War. So long as there was a Cold War a hot ‘Third World War’ could not be precluded. The likely belligerents and even a *casus belli* could be identified. Furthermore, any optimism about the indefinite continuation

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of the 'long peace' had to be qualified because of the notoriously bad track record of predictions of the imminent obsolescence of war. Reviews of such prophecies over the twentieth century normally cite Norman Angell as the saddest case.\textsuperscript{2} It took time, after the rather stark counter-examples of the First and Second World Wars, for the prediction to be revived. The revival came as the full implications of a thermonuclear war began to sink in. In the 1960s Walter Millis played the role of prophet;\textsuperscript{3} as did John Mueller in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{4} Martin van Creveld's qualified version of the thesis appeared in print on the eve of the Gulf War.\textsuperscript{5}

The thesis has always depended on a comparison of the ruinous consequences of major war with the conceivable benefits, and has gained strength as a result of the growing horrors of war on the one hand, and the logic of economic interdependence on the other. The two sides of this equation have different implications for the debate on the utility of force. Suppose that war is becoming obsolescent because there is nothing much to fight about. We are all becoming part of an increasingly homogeneous global economy sharing the same cultural experiences and normative values, with international institutions available to sort out our residual differences. Here our expectations with regard to the future of war are bound up with our expectations for the development of the international system as a whole and especially the degree of our optimism on whether this is turning into something resembling a world society.

If, however, the hypothesis depends on the frightful consequences of war, then force still has a utility in keeping those consequences frightful. Furthermore, to the extent that they cease to become frightful, because some states have ceased to maintain serious military establishments, then those that have kept their establishments in good repair might suddenly come to see war as a perfectly rational instrument of policy. This is a familiar conundrum and explains why the 'declining utility of force' thesis has been judged so dangerous in the past. To act as if force had no utility for us creates utility for our potential enemies. Unless we can be sure that war has become truly extinct we are tempted to hold on to our armed forces just in case.

When we come across a region that is apparently at peace with itself, but also contains significant amounts of military power, can we assume that the extraction of that power will involve no net loss of tranquillity? This puzzle was posed regularly during the Cold War, especially as it became progressively less certain that stability depended upon mutual deterrence. Nonetheless, few seemed disposed to push for truly radical disarmament, just in case those military capabilities that might have been thought to be largely vestigial relics of an earlier, harsher period were still serving as essential props of an inherently

\textsuperscript{2} Norman Angell, \textit{The great illusion} (London: Heinemann, 1914).
\textsuperscript{3} Walter Millis, \textit{An end to arms} (New York: Atheneum, 1964).
\textsuperscript{5} Martin van Creveld, in \textit{The transformation of war} (New York: Free Press, 1991).
Military power and political influence

fragile system. Does the absence of any obvious scenarios for war mean that even the most preliminary, discreet preparations for war are nugatory? Or, alternatively, might quite modest preparations be one reason why war remains unthinkable? If war is unthinkable, can these preparations still affect events?

This article examines the question of the utility of force in circumstances where there seems to be no immediate danger of war. It considers the influence exerted by military power when it is merely latent, rather than when it is conspicuously in play, when specific political effects are being sought through coercive diplomacy or actual hostilities. The contemporary relevance of this question for the armed forces of the Atlantic alliance is evident, and will be considered in the conclusion to the article. I am, however, reluctant to add to the substantial but unavoidably speculative ‘whither the international system?’ literature. Instead I want to step back a quarter of a century to a time when the same question was being asked, but in a quite different context, and was addressed by John Vincent in his Adelphi Paper.

The strategic environment of the mid-1970s has been rather neglected. It is caught in the nether world between opened archives and recent memory. The decades on either side were more dramatic and controversial, with a revolution in lifestyles in the 1960s and one in economic behaviour in the 1980s. By contrast the 1970s were pretty dismal, not a time of great cheer and optimism, with the international economy weak, dragged down by energy shortages. Yet this is a period to which historians are bound to pay increasing attention, and one that provides an extremely interesting contrast with the present day.

Both the mid-1970s and the 1990s were considered to be post-Cold War periods. In the first case the contrast was between different stages in the superpower relationship—a transition from confrontation to detente, a shift in the balance between competition and cooperation, to be reflected, as claimed by the administration of Richard Nixon, in an ‘age of negotiation’. East–West relations were characterized by better communications and mechanisms for crisis management, serious arms control negotiations and a range of agreements which appeared to bind the European fracture and consolidate the status quo. These included the belated peace treaties between the Federal Republic of Germany and Warsaw Pact countries, the four-power agreement on Berlin and the 1975 Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. This period was seen at the time, and to some extent is now remembered, as one of the more stable: a model of bipolarity in practice, peaceful coexistence born out of mutual deterrence.

In the event detente turned out to be at best a moderate interlude before tensions rose again to dangerous levels at the end of the decade and into the early 1980s, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the election of

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6 The ‘spin’ of the time is reflected in the progressively optimistic titles of the successive ‘State of the World’ reports to Congress by President Nixon: ‘A new strategy for peace’ (1970); ‘Building the peace’ (1971); ‘The emerging structure of peace’ (1972); and ‘Shaping a durable peace’ (1973).
Ronald Reagan to the US presidency. The most notorious contemporary characterization of this later period was the ‘second Cold War’. The events of 1989–90, and the complete collapse of European communism and all its strategic manifestations, provided a much more definite end to the Cold War, though it also encouraged a view of the previous four decades as being far more homogeneous than was actually the case. Many historians would now argue that there was a qualitative difference between the ‘short Cold War’, which lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, when the sting was drawn from the superpower confrontation by the twin crises of Berlin and Cuba, and what followed.

The utility of force

The debate on the utility of force in the 1970s was largely conducted within the countries of the Atlantic alliance. As John Vincent then explained, in the context of recent wars of all types in East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, ‘The idea that both the utility and legitimacy of force has declined is a Western one which has small correspondence with experience outside the West.’ In the West the starting point was the nuclear issue. By the early 1970s the condition of mutual assured destruction had come to be accepted as a fact of life, if not a targeting strategy. Efforts were now focused on confirming this condition through the mechanism of strategic arms control. Headway was made with the 1972 strategic arms limitation treaty, though the attempt to take it further ran into resistance. This led in 1974 to Henry Kissinger’s outburst in Moscow, when he asked rhetorically about the meaning of strategic superiority: ‘When two nations are already capable of destroying each other, an upper limit exists beyond which additional weapons lose their political significance.’ This proposition was challenged as an American rather than a Soviet belief. For its part, Moscow was said to be clinging to the possibility of fighting and winning a nuclear war. A compromise position, adopted by the Carter administration, was that whatever beliefs were actually held in the Kremlin, allies and the non-aligned might alter their behaviour if they supposed that Moscow enjoyed any sort of potentially decisive strategic advantage, or just believed itself to do so.

3 Vincent, Military power and political influence, p. 4.
4 Note that the Americans had been prepared to accept the reality of mutual assured destruction in 1964—before the massive build-up of Soviet nuclear strength that allowed them to catch up in quantitative terms with the United States. Lawrence Freedman, The evolution of nuclear strategy, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1989), ch. 16.
6 For example, Richard Pipes, ‘Why the Soviet Union thinks it could fight and win a nuclear war’, Commentary 64: 1, July 1977.
Military power and political influence

Attempts actually to identify such a decisive advantage when neither side could aspire realistically to a first-strike capability depend on suppositions as to how future political leaders might respond to a set of fanciful contingencies. Those who followed the tortuous circumlocutions that passed for strategic analysis in those days were well prepared for the onset of post-modernist theorizing in international relations! For years, defence dollars were allocated through the consideration of an often incomprehensible text that was apparently beyond empirical validation and susceptible to multiple interpretations.

The political influence of nuclear weapons lay in their latent power. Actual use would be a catastrophe, offending strategic logic as well as ethical principles. But the faint possibility of use, precisely because it would be so catastrophic, left a formidable imprint. Throughout the Cold War the nuclear overhang reinforced a sense that the main benefit of force lay in what was held in reserve. The military capacity of the West was never to be used to its full extent. The mindset was one in which it had become too dangerous to prepare to crush enemies with overwhelming force. Military moves should be designed to create a superior bargaining position. So in all considerations of force at this time there was ‘a predominance of the latent over the manifest, of the oblique over the direct, of the limited over the general’.

The model of graduated escalation became embedded in the Western strategic consciousness and in NATO doctrine. If the crisis came the alliance would move from one type of operation to another, each one more frightful than the one before, until it began to approach Armageddon. At some point the enemy might be persuaded to ‘cease his aggression and withdraw’, or else the dread choice would be faced as to whether to go for suicide or surrender.

This model made few allowances for a fraught, even panic-stricken decision-making process, complicated by alliance pressure, or the probability that military actions would defy attempts to control their pace, scope and direction. Recent Western military experience warned that even at the lower rungs of the escalation ladder, graduated response offered a misleading prospect. In particular, on less than vital issues, the demands of combat at these lower rungs could still seem excessive, if they led into a prolonged and inconclusive engagement.

Of obvious relevance here was the Vietnam experience. It later became commonplace to think of the ‘Vietnam syndrome’ in terms of the intolerance

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14 The Reagan administration took the most alarmist interpretation available, though in the end it was unable to demonstrate that either side had a way out of the dilemmas of the nuclear age. Before the end of the Cold War there was a further turn in this deconstructionist nuclear philosophy in the development of an existentialist postulate. According to this view, deterrence had become a function of the very existence of nuclear weapons, for this meant that they could be used, however irrational an act that would be, and this residual possibility encouraged restraint. The corollary of this simple, and generally persuasive, thesis was that numbers and types of weapons, let alone any doctrine governing their use in anger, were largely irrelevant. McGeorge Bundy, ‘The bishops and the bomb’, The New York Review, 16 June 1983.

of casualties, but it is not evident that this was the main preoccupation of the 1970s. What then caused so much outrage over the Vietnam War was not simply that so many people had been killed, or even that so many of the Americans had been draftees, but that they had died in pursuit of an unworthy cause pursued through a futile strategy. At issue was much more than casualties, terrible though they were, for the conduct of the war led to a challenge to the whole legitimacy of armed force, and arguably of the modern state.  

The most radical critique developed as a result of Vietnam argued that the superficially democratic political system had become distorted as a result of the malign influence of the ‘military–industrial complex’. National insecurities had been manipulated. Lurid pictures of foreign threats had been painted, in various shades of red and yellow, leading the government to purchase an excessive military inventory. This had turned the United States into a source of international insecurity, stimulating an arms race that was as dangerous as it was wasteful as it was unnecessary, inflaming local conflicts to make the world safe for multinational companies. American military power was illegitimate because it encouraged neocolonial wars and reckless nuclear deployments.

More widespread was a sense of the relative incompetence of the American military and the pointlessness of its endeavours. The purposes for which force was being used were not illegitimate, but nor were they worth the effort devoted to them. They were not central to national interests. This view was reinforced by weariness with the Cold War and confidence in detente. All this led to a general disenchantment with the military establishment, scepticism towards its contentions and wariness of its claims on resources. Laurence Martin observed that ‘For many Western taxpayers, the military are on the way to becoming latter-day remittance men, given a small slice of the family income on condition they go off and pursue their unsavoury activities quietly where they will not embarrass decent folk.’ In the new post-Cold War world of the 1970s it appeared that the prime goals of foreign policy must be economic, and force was of little benefit here. Moreover, complained Martin, the view was that ‘Exercising force is expensive and increasingly distasteful as a personal activity for industrial man, suiting neither his own preferences for a way of life nor his sense of proper conduct towards others.’ The combination of radical and moderate critiques led to a constant pressure on defence

17 The term was reintroduced into the political lexicon at President Eisenhower’s valedictory address in 1960. His concern at the time, however, was largely the marketing efforts the complex had mounted on behalf of large weapons projects. Some of the more prominent examples of this genre were Ralph Lapp, The weapons culture (New York: Norton, 1968); Richard Kaufman, The war profiteers (New York: Doubleday, 1972). For more academic approaches, see Sam Sarkesian, ed., The military–industrial complex: a reassessment (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972).  
18 For a representative version of this line of thinking, see David Horowitz, The free world colossus: a critique of American foreign policy in the Cold War, American Century series (New York: Hill & Wang, 1971).  
Military power and political influence

budgets, calls for disengagement and disarmament, and a presumption that, having got it so badly wrong in Vietnam, political leaders could no longer be trusted and had to be smothered in checks and balances to thwart any temptations to reckless action. The demand for greater accountability was reflected in the US in the War Powers Act of 1973.

The academic community contributed to this new mood in a number of ways. The most obvious was the challenge to realism and the so-called ‘rational actor’ model that had dominated strategic studies up to the mid-1960s. There were all sorts of reasons for doubting the inevitable rationality of governments, let alone the extent to which they might usefully be viewed in a unitary form. Rationality was susceptible, in the new, vogue terminology, to ‘groupthink’, ‘bureaucratic politics’ and ‘misperception’. Case-studies suggested that when American governments sought to deter and coerce, they paid insufficient attention to the possibly stronger motivations of their opponents, the benefits of inducements and the potential for a negotiated settlement. As the empirical work on crisis management and deterrence took off, one soon started to wonder whether there had ever been a successful communication between international adversaries. In a bizarre way this intellectual climate contributed to the postmodern nuclear strategy referred to earlier. Liberal remedies for this situation at times appeared to require introducing modern counselling and encounter group techniques into higher decision-making. Largely they took the form of sensible pleas to try to think hard about how a conflict might look to those on the other side, and to ensure that the conventional wisdom was subjected to constant, critical scrutiny.

Because the thrust of so much of this work was to discourage the use of force it was quite unhelpful on how to deploy it effectively. There was nothing comparable to the inventive, if often zany, discussions of the early 1960s on the modalities of nuclear deterrence and counter-insurgency. There was a palpable loss of self-confidence among the old guard. Bernard Brodie, for example, bemoaned the way that limited war theorizing had been allowed to enter a ‘rococo stage’, but even liberal theorists now confessed themselves cured of these past misconceptions. The few civilian recruits to strategic studies in the 1970s tended to reflect the sceptical and anxious attitudes of the academic community. To the extent that they bothered with technical, operational questions, they stuck to the safe realms of arms control. If force had lost its utility there seemed to be little point in spending a lot of time studying its applications: better to concentrate on its control, containment and ultimate marginalization.

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20 This latter requirement was given added point as the Pentagon Papers revealed the perspicacity but minimal effect of Under-Secretary of State George Ball’s private dissent on Vietnam. See Senator Mike Gravel, ed., The Pentagon Papers: history of the United States decision making on Vietnam, 5 vols (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). On Ball, see James A. Bill, George Ball: behind the scenes in US foreign policy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

Lawrence Freedman

Back to the threat

Unfortunately, force only becomes useless when everyone agrees that this should be so. During the 1970s it became evident that armed force had not fallen out of fashion, and was shaping events, often in ways apparently contrary to Western interests, in many parts of the globe. Most alarmingly, there seemed to be few grounds for supposing that the Soviet Union was at all convinced of the non-utility of force. The mood changed as the new left gave way to neo-conservatism, as often as not within the same person. The neo-conservative indictment was of a failure to respond to an aggressive Soviet military buildup, with the inevitable consequence of a slide into appeasement.

How serious was this charge? From 1967 to 1972 the Soviet ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) force grew from 570 to 1406, while, even more dramatic, the SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile) tally increased from 27 to 440, with more to come. The SALT agreements of the latter year recorded a Soviet missile advantage over the United States, although the American lead in bombers and multiple warhead technology provided a degree of compensation. However, over the next five years, as the Russians fitted multiple warheads to their much larger missiles, they drew well ahead on this measure as well. Meanwhile, under the enthusiastic leadership of Admiral Gorshkov, it was busy constructing a navy to compare with that of the United States. Its army and air force held the line in central and eastern Europe, having demonstrated their utility to Moscow as recently as 1968 when they quashed the ‘Prague Spring’, while the emerging ‘China threat’ had been dealt with by the construction of a whole new force based in the Soviet Far East. Whether this all reflected ideological motivations or old-fashioned great power calculations, the trend was clear and worrying.

Detente appeared as a triumph for Soviet diplomacy. Core security interests had been achieved: unambiguous nuclear parity with the United States; the ratification of the European status quo; sustaining the Soviet sphere of influence and Leninist political systems within this sphere. Moscow had been served well by military power. There was no contradiction with its embrace of detente, because its growing strength facilitated effective negotiation. ‘There is no question of significance,’ boasted foreign minister Andrei Gromyko at the 24th Party Congress in 1971, ‘which can be decided without the Soviet Union or in opposition to her.’

It was known that the demands made by the military on the Soviet economy were excessive, contributing to its stagnation. The defence establishment had come to see the proponents of reform as enemies rather than saviours and so had sidelined them, thereby turning what might have been a ‘bad patch’ into a chronic structural defect. In the West the neo-conservative...

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Military power and political influence

response was that Soviet military power could work to its own salvation. The Kremlin’s strategy was to use detente to reinvigorate the economy by allowing access to Western technology and credits.

Economists realized that this effort was probably doomed to failure, given that the socialist planning system created an inhospitable environment for imported technologies, which required quite different forms of organization if they were to be properly exploited. But this was a time when there was more confidence in the ability of politicians to invigorate their economies. Western economic management was considered to be hardly exemplary and, anyway, security specialists notoriously paid little attention to economic factors. The weaknesses in the Soviet economy seemed largely confined to the civilian sphere. While consumers were undoubtedly losing out, the military were able to dragoon numerous scientists and engineers into a comparatively effective heavy industrial system that always saved its best efforts and people for defence work. The Russian people had been obliged to make sacrifices and suffer terribly in the past to ensure the survival of the communist system. Who was to say that they would not do so again in the future? Until well into the 1980s there was an odd debate under way as to whether we should worry about mean and hungry Russians, who might take reckless action out of desperation, or fat and contented Russians, who might have less cause for desperate action but the wherewithal to conclude it successfully.

The more innovative military thinkers in the West appeared convinced that the Soviet military were on top of the game, even though they might be falling behind in the more advanced military technologies. The West, it was suggested, might do well to follow the Soviet way of concentrating on developing doctrines, organizational forms and rugged, usable equipment, for large-scale and decisive operations, and stop assuming that technical innovation could compensate for a neglect of the traditional military virtues.

The Warsaw Pact enjoyed a conventional superiority, even to the point where it could launch a ‘standing-start’ attack and catch NATO before it had time to mobilize.

The neo-conservatives observed that the Soviet leadership harboured few doubts that the ‘correlation of forces’ was turning their way. This dubious concept was treated with great reverence by Western commentators at the time. The ‘correlation of forces’ was essentially an elaborate, more inclusive, Marxist version of the ‘balance of power’. As always with these measures, much depended on the weight to be given to individual factors, and in this case there was a non-Marxist playing down of the economic factor. In addition, much depended on the other side of the equation—the direction of the com-

parable trend in the West. It was gloom in this regard that made the shift in the Soviet direction credible. The thought was captured simply in the title of a much-cited article by Andrew Pierre of 1971: ‘America down, Russia up’.25

In the early 1970s America’s political system was bruised and its economy was floundering. Germany and Japan were acquiring political weight through their economic prowess rather than their still limited military power. In 1973–4 came the oil shock, when Arab countries first established a link between access to oil and support for Israel, and then seized their opportunity to make a lot of money very quickly. This led to a decade of stagflation. The question of whether military measures might be found to ease this political pressure and economic distress was answered largely in the negative, after a quite serious exploration. In the event the West turned to the export of military equipment to the Middle East as a means of recycling petrodollars, thereby limiting its future ability to exert influence in that region through military means. Russia, of course, was still judged at the time to be energy-rich.

The American reluctance to accept new military commitments in the Third World after Vietnam was palpable and quite natural. The Nixon doctrine of 1969 suggested that in future the United States would only help friendly states that helped themselves. America’s wretched experience does not appear to have had much impact on Soviet expectations, perhaps on the comfortable ideological presumption that they truly were working with the progressive forces of history. The last of the major Western empires to fall did so in 1974, as the Portuguese revolution led to an abrupt withdrawal from its colonies.26 This provided opportunities for Soviet intervention, as did the overthrow of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, plus sundry other disturbances, including, later in the decade, that in Afghanistan. These were often presented as being linked in some sort of grand strategy, directed against the West’s oil vulnerability. In practice they dragged the Soviet Union, or its East German and Cuban allies, into grim, inconclusive campaigns that produced little profit and, in the case of Afghanistan, had catastrophic consequences all round. Henry Kissinger, out of office, described Moscow’s ‘geopolitical’ purpose in the Horn of Africa as ‘to outflank the Middle East, to demonstrate that the US cannot protect its


26 This is, incidentally, one of those events that need a reappraisal. At the time the greatest significance of the Portuguese revolution was seen to lie in the apparently communist sympathies of the officers involved. This was when ‘Euro-communism’ was in vogue, though it was always largely an Italian phenomenon. The French Communist Party never quite managed the trick of reinventing itself. Nonetheless, at the time Pentagon maps showed red arrows circulating all round the Mediterranean as well as moving round the Horn of Africa. As one who found the Portuguese dictatorship to have been a blot on NATO’s democratic credentials, I remember being quite shocked to hear James Schlesinger, then the American Secretary of Defense, suggest that the revolution had been a blow for the ‘free world’. In the event, with some help from the rest of Europe, Portugal turned itself into a healthy and stable democracy. Portugal’s colonial legacy took longer to address, with Angola and Mozambique only now beginning to recover from terrible civil wars and East Timor under Indonesian occupation.
Military power and political influence

friends, to raise doubts in Saudi Arabia right across the Red Sea, in Egypt, in the Sudan and in Iran’.27

At the time this ill-conceived Soviet involvement in Third World troubles largely served to confirm the Kremlin’s assertiveness and readiness to resort to military means in pursuit of its political objectives. Yet there was little expectation in Europe that the correlation of forces was soon going to put Moscow in a position to contemplate a major political—let alone military—offensive against NATO. Despite gloomy descriptions of how Warsaw Pact operational manoeuvre groups might spring across the inner-German border, disorientating NATO before it had a chance to mobilise, convincing scenarios for a Third World War remained hard to construct.28 The East–West mood music of the time was reassuring if bland. John Vincent, for example, accepted that as a result of detente the future course of Europe was ‘no longer tightly circumscribed by the Cold War and a “Soviet threat”’. He did not dismiss entirely the relevance of calculations as to the form and level of a Soviet attack—what he called ‘threat as menace’—but his interest was in the effects of Soviet military power on the conduct of European politics, ‘independent of the particular will of the Soviet Union on a particular occasion’. What was the impact of the presence of Soviet power on European politicians? Had they become more anxious to reassure, and to avoid giving offence to, this power lest it be provoked? If it was the case that the decline of tensions between the blocs would lead to greater fluidity within them, might Moscow’s military assets give it significant advantages without really needing to flex its muscles at all? The concern was evident in the subtitle of John Vincent’s Adelphi Paper: The Soviet Union and Western Europe.

Soviet ideologists insisted at this time, with what conviction it is hard to tell, that capitalism was in deep crisis and that the Western alliance system was in the process of decomposing, while progressive forces were taking great strides forward in the Third World. A prudent, mutual accommodation between the superpowers was by no means the same as a freezing of the status quo. If the United States did begin to disengage from Europe, and if economic and political tensions loosened the ties that held the European members of NATO together, then it was possible to imagine quite different strategic configurations on the continent. One model of how things might develop, even without major continental upheavals, was represented by Finland. The Finns enjoyed independence but disciplined themselves so as not to antagonise Moscow, acknowledged the existence of a ‘Russia party’ as part of their domestic politics, and qualified a formal neutrality with an informal tilt to the East. As a general model it failed to attach sufficient weight to the specifics of history and


geography, or the considerable freedom of manoeuvre that the Finns had still managed to carve out for themselves. Nonetheless, for much of the decade ‘Finlandization’ served conservative commentators as a shorthand when describing the humiliating fate awaiting western Europe if it continued to disregard its strategic interests.

The evidence that Moscow had much interest in expanding its European sphere of influence is scanty. Within Europe the strengthening of Warsaw Pact forces is best explained by the post-Khrushchev reversion to a more conventional strategy and the garrisoning of Czechoslovakia following the 1968 suppression of the Prague Spring. Whatever the consequences that might have followed the ‘decomposition’ of the Western alliance, Soviet leaders certainly did not act as if they would be invariably positive. The preference for a stable balance of power, including a substantial American military presence in Europe, was indicated most notoriously in 1972 when a carefully timed speech by Leonid Brezhnev, accepting talks on mutual force reductions, took the steam out of congressional pressure for unilateral force reductions. The things that Moscow appeared to fear most were the release of Germany from alliance constraints and insurrections in the satellite countries, especially if they were actively supported by Western powers.

By and large, NATO countries respected these interests and concerns. With the exception of Jimmy Carter’s promotion of human rights and President Reagan’s combative rhetoric, they refrained from mounting overt challenges to the Soviet system. The conventional wisdom in Europe was that these acts were naïve, unhelpful and provocative (all favourite words to describe acts or statements that seem valid in themselves but carry a risk of unpleasantness down the road). By the late 1970s the general tenor of west European policy reflected a conviction that the advantages of a quiet life brought about by detente should not be compromised by picking fights with Moscow in areas of peripheral concern. At issue here was not a potential upset to the European status quo but the growing Soviet interest in the Third World. This led to a European effort to restrain the Americans when they appeared to be getting too worked up about Soviet meddling in what were largely inconsequential bits of territory. British Prime Minister James Callaghan, for example, spoke with some irritation of the sudden American discovery of Africa.

This stance was not the crude product of a fear of Soviet military power. There was no sense of a veto on foreign policies, and the more blatant campaigns of pressure in the West directed by Moscow were generally resisted. Experience warned against fomenting rebellions in the East when nothing could be done to back them, and against recasting every postcolonial struggle in the Third World as a vital confrontation in the Cold War. There was in fact no great diplomatic effort of any sort directed towards the Soviet Union by the west Europeans, especially once the West Germans had sorted out their relations with their eastern neighbours. High-level visits tended to be taken up with trade and export credits, punctuated by solemn declarations in favour of
world peace. Strategic arms control and international crises were matters for the superpowers, and so if the Europeans wanted to exercise any influence they had to work on Washington rather than Moscow. They did not want to be led by the United States into unnecessary confrontations, but nor did they want to lose American leadership by appearing to be so parochial and timid that they were no longer judged to be worth defending. They were keen to assert their distinctive contributions to international affairs, but not to the point where it could be assumed that they could manage without the Americans. Balancing these various pressures meant that the Atlantic alliance seemed to be forever in disarray, in stark contrast to the disciplined array of the Warsaw Pact.

We are now better able to appreciate the true extent of the economic infirmity of the communist system and the pent-up demands for political change. In the end detente was not required to reduce the pace of Soviet ascendance, as Henry Kissinger had supposed, by entangling it in a series of agreements limiting its ability further to develop and exploit its military power. The brakes were built in. If anything, detente provided an excuse for Moscow to avoid confronting its fundamental weaknesses. No serious restrictions were put on its defence spending: it continued to believe that it could use its military strength to face down its communist rivals in China and to gain footholds in the Third World. It used deals with the West to address—unsuccessfully—deficiencies in its technology, grain production and finances. It did nothing to remedy the sense of cynicism and illegitimacy surrounding the claims of the Communist Party or to rein in the repressive apparatus that sustained its 'vanguard' role. The significance of the nod in the direction of human rights in basket three of the Helsinki Final Act was only really recognized by a handful of activists in eastern Europe. Appreciation of the power relationships at the time, we can say in retrospect, focused too much on the more militaristic indices and not enough on the more economic and political. The only prudent assumption was that the Soviet Union was a fixture of the European scene. If it was over-reliant on brute force, then that was another reason to treat it gingerly.

While it would have required an unusual feat of imagination to fast-forward to the demise of the Soviet bloc, the signs of the underlying crisis were all there at the start of the 1980s when Solidarity made its mark as an independent, popular movement in Poland. In many ways this episode confirmed past assumptions about the political role of Soviet military power. That brooding presence prompted General Jaruselski to impose martial law rather than risk a Soviet intervention. Meanwhile west European leaders, including Mrs Thatcher, turned a blind eye to a Soviet breach of the provisions in the Helsinki Final Act with regard to the size of exercises, as troops were massed

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Lawrence Freedman

close to the Soviet border, while American calls for economic sanctions were firmly resisted.\textsuperscript{30} Officially, there was support for Solidarity; but not a few wondered whether the Poles had been unwise to push so hard and bemoaned their selfish disregard for the needs of European stability. Within a few years, after a remarkable period of attrition among the Soviet gerontocracy, it was evident that Europe was entering a phase of transition.

Mikhail Gorbachev was uncomfortable with the idea that communist power must rest on the threat of brute force. He was convinced that the military burden on the Soviet economy had to be lightened, and that this required a new and more deep-rooted detente with the West. Only belatedly did he fully appreciate the link between Soviet military power and the maintenance of a Soviet sphere of influence. He hoped that this sphere might obtain its own legitimacy through a reformist project; but by this time the rot had set in and the momentum of change had become unstoppable. The Soviet military had suffered through its failure to defeat the \textit{mujahedin} in Afghanistan. Yet Gorbachev was still required to rule out explicitly the use of force to sustain the Soviet position in eastern Europe for the change to follow its comfortably graceful course. The events that followed the sudden removal of the repressive constraint imposed by Soviet military power in early 1989 are a testimony of sorts to its importance up to this time. If Gorbachev had insisted on following the practice of his predecessors in this regard, there is no evidence that the West would have done much about it. Within individual countries the crucial moments came as military units had to decide whether or not they should fire on their own people. The role of force as the ultimate arbiter of power was largely confirmed by its absence—but on occasion more by its presence, as in Romania and then, in a series of internal power struggles, in Russia.

\textbf{American power}

The decline and fall of the Soviet empire coincided, not wholly by chance, with the reassertion of American power. Attitudes in the United States towards military spending began to shift during the mid-1970s and led to NATO countries promising in 1978 to raise defence spending by a regular 3 per cent a year.\textsuperscript{31} In December 1979 an even more difficult decision was taken to introduce intermediate-range nuclear forces into Europe. Later Ronald Reagan prided himself on his tough stance while, at the same time, demonstrating a readiness to throw American weight around.

Although the controversies of this period focused on nuclear weapons, most of the important developments were in conventional forces. These developments had been set in train during the early 1970s, but it took time for their

\textsuperscript{31} It required events in Afghanistan for this to be taken seriously.
Military power and political influence

importance to be recognized, though they were exhibited briefly in Vietnam in 1972 and then in the Arab–Israeli war of 1973. Few were convinced that the Soviet Union would be left behind (though the more far-sighted Soviet generals such as Ogarkov did see the writing on the wall), and the Warsaw Pact still enjoyed the quantitative advantage. Many of the more influential analysts shared with civilian hawks a conviction that the Soviet Union had a better grasp of ‘operational art’. Moreover, it was hard to believe in the Cold War being decided by a conventional battle. So long as nuclear weapons were primed and ready to go, they dominated all strategic calculations as far as major war was concerned. The most that might be expected of the new technologies was that they might raise the nuclear threshold. That appeared to most Europeans as unnecessarily expensive at a time when defence budgets were under threat and detente reigned supreme.

Those who modernized American military practice paved the way for the triumph of Operation Desert Storm, but they made slight difference to any Western strategic calculations in the intervening years. Though we can now appreciate the advances being made in American military doctrine, the events of this period were less impressive: a series of small-scale engagements, hardly implemented with conviction. Notwithstanding the Reagan administration’s later claims to be more ready to use arms, this was hardly the stuff of military legend—a muscle-bound attack on Tripoli, a ham-fisted occupation of Grenada and an embarrassing and bad-tempered retreat from Beirut.

After the Cold War

I have considered the political influence obtained by Soviet military power in Europe during the 1970s and will now look forward to that obtained by American military power in subsequent decades. The former appears to have been more substantial, but that is hardly surprising. Soviet power in the 1970s was being exercised for largely defensive purposes within its own neighbourhood. Its credibility was high. Its core interests were well understood, and had been for some time. There was a built-in, almost instinctive, accommodation to Soviet interests in all European policy-making; comparable efforts were made to attend to American interests, though the American position did not depend on brute force and, for reasons of geography and history, appeared much more conditional than that of the Soviet Union.

Equally, American problems in projecting military power overseas were more than matched by the Soviet Union. Soviet efforts to use its military assets to enhance its political standing away from its own borders, or even more recent Russian efforts to assert its authority over its ‘near abroad’, illustrated just how little might be achieved even after intensive military efforts when operating in hostile regional environments. After all, those most keen on introducing external actors into local situations are likely to be those who cannot otherwise cope, and whose security requires more than expressions of...
Lawrence Freedman

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Military power and political influence

President Carter seeking to reassert American power in the Gulf area after the fall of the Shah in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The problem here was that while local actors agreed with some of the American political goals they were profoundly suspicious of others, and this reduced their willingness to facilitate a deeper American involvement in regional affairs, for example by providing base facilities. Furthermore, any serious American involvement was likely to require—in a fluid situation—not just presence but a demonstrated readiness to enter hostilities. This process was haphazard through the 1980s and only really reached the intended destination during 1990–1 when the Saudi regime felt that it faced a potentially mortal challenge and the Americans went out of their way to demonstrate their commitment. In 1979, after the fall of the Shah, the Carter administration had agreed to the dispatch of some F-15s to Saudi Arabia as a show of force, only for it to be announced when the aircraft were in mid-flight that they were unarmed. In 1990 hundreds of aircraft and hundreds of thousands of troops were to be sent. Even this coalition, forged in an emergency and reinforced by a successful war, came to seem fragile as Saddam Hussein held on to power and the Arab–Israeli peace process faltered. Close, semi-permanent arrangements are difficult to create at arm’s length and on the basis of limited liability. They require a continuing engagement in local political affairs. The necessary grasp of interests and obligations is hard to sort out in crisis mode.

By contrast, the American role in Europe confirms that a known military capacity, linked to a known set of interests, can help maintain a particular pattern of behaviour within a reasonably stable context. Furthermore, contrary to what was expected, this did not require the Soviet ‘threat’ to be sustained. This is essentially what was achieved by Soviet military power in Europe. The process of NATO enlargement indicates that for countries in the centre of Europe, still bearing the scars of this century’s wars, the opportunity to gain access to the benefits of an established alliance is welcome. The informed view is that these countries are not in jeopardy, and that the purpose of joining NATO is to get membership of a Western club rather than security guarantees. This view may underestimate the importance attached to access to Western, and particularly American, military power as a source of security. In return for allowing access to its military power, NATO has been able to exert a formidable political influence over Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary—requiring standards of democratic behaviour, a commitment to an open economy, moderate foreign policies and modern civil–military practices. Other countries that want to follow this path will have to submit in similar fashion.

The political effects of Soviet military power could not be sustained precisely because the arrangements that it was underpinning were essentially coercive in nature, and thus collapsed as soon as the power lost its menace. At the end of the 1970s Dmitri Simes observed that while ‘quite often Moscow managed to translate its military potential into sizable political benefits . . . it is hard to ignore the simple fact that a global power that puts a disproportionate
emphasis on military power because it lacks other adequate policy tools cannot be as effective in meeting specific needs as it would be if it had more varied and finely tuned instruments. The fact that the power was being exerted within the Soviet Union’s own region gave it a durability it might otherwise have lacked. American military power is more evident, and often much more coercive, within its own region. Elsewhere its durability has reinforced itself: it has become a familiar, largely benign, feature of the security environment that reduces the importance of the military factor by taking care of it, preventing it from becoming a matter of local rivalry. Without the United States there would be a need to reappraise security relations, in the process probably giving salience to issues that could otherwise remain happily dormant.

John Vincent concluded in his Adelphi Paper that ‘There is clearly a relationship between military power in being and political impact on its environment.’ In following him into an analysis of Soviet military power in Europe in the 1970s I have confirmed this conclusion. Taking the analysis forward to American military power in the 1990s suggests a paradoxical twist to this conclusion. The point about latent military power is that it can allow political relations to develop without violence. So while it might have been thought that the lack of obvious conflict scenarios would qualify American military power to the point of its irrelevance, its value may have been in reinforcing the irrelevance of other sources of military power.

Whether this role can be sustained over the long term is questionable. It is one thing to ask the United States to keep a stable situation stable, by hanging around, as in Europe. It is quite another to expect it to act sensitively and effectively to maintain or even create stability in environments that are displaying increasing signs of volatility. When local crises erupt the Americans may decide that the costs of an active role, especially if it involves the use of force, have become excessive, while the locals may become acutely aware of a divergence between their own interests and those of the United States. Thus Washington’s European allies disagreed over Bosnia, Asian allies became uncomfortable with the positions taken on North Korea and Taiwan, as did Arab allies with American policies towards Iran, Iraq and Israel. The paradox of military power in being is that the political benefits that can be obtained tend to be largely negative, that is, evident in a lack of dangerous developments, and are put at risk as soon as there is pressure to move to its activation.

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13 John Vincent, Military power and political influence.