2 Explaining Soviet Defence Spending

The Bolsheviks viewed the capitalist dynamic as one of inevitable collapse in societies rent by their own internal contradictions. If the indigenous proletariat was in a position to exploit the socio-economic contradictions, revolution need have no adverse impact on the international community, and hence on the socialist states already in being. However, no timetable could be established for the resolution of the proletarian struggle in any one capitalist country, nor in capitalism as a socio-economic system. Until that time the capitalist class would seek to mitigate internal discord by aggressive attacks on those states which had made the successful transition to socialism. Thus even in socialist states, which were by definition harmonious, military expenditures were a regrettable necessity. War, if and when it came, would inevitably be the decisive phase in the competition between the capitalist and socialist states, from which the USSR, as the only exponent of socialism, must emerge victorious. It was not enough that the Soviet Union match capitalist spending on armaments, it had to ensure superiority in the production and deployment of personnel and those armaments which were likely to prove crucial in war. Thus although Bolshevik intellectuals had argued that socialist states had no need of a standing army, Socialism in One Country forced and/or justified to political leaders a more practical assessment of the role of the military. Even in the midst of severe economic difficulties in the 1920s, the Bolshevik party set out to establish the organisational basis for the expansion of the Red Army. In 1927, the Party published a Five Year Plan which outlined proposals to bring the armed forces up to requisite numerical strength and technological level. Party leaders understood that armaments production was feasible only on the basis of a secure economic, and especially industrial, foundation, and from the outset, the objective of catching up and overtaking capitalism inextricably conjoined the economic and the military dimensions of socialist development.¹ This crucial requirement for a coordinated and systematic expansion of military and economic production gave a powerful rationale for centralised economic planning, and in 1928 the first economic Five Year Plan was accompanied by a Five Year Plan for the development of the Red
Army, a symbiosis which has characterised the Soviet Union since that time.

The Soviet growth strategy, later characterised as extensive, was based on mobilising massive quantities of underutilised, mainly agricultural, factor inputs, with only a secondary role for economic efficiency as conventionally understood in the West. Although it is not possible to identify exact and explicit causal correlations between economic and military strategy, there did emerge a broad based synergising relationship between the two, as planning for national security reflected the basic parameters of the economic model. The overriding objective of rapid growth plus the shortage of technically competent planners and managers rationalised quantity planning in terms of targets which were easily understood and monitored. At much the same time Soviet strategists rejected the then favoured Western strategy of a small highly mechanised force using technologically sophisticated weapons, in favour of one which emphasised a large standing army. It would, under the circumstances, be quite inconsistent and inefficient to plan for the production of small quantities of technologically advanced weapons. From the outset, therefore, Soviet armaments factories produced large numbers of relatively simple but sturdy and high quality artillery, tanks and aircraft, a principle of weapons production which has been sustained by and large to the present day.

Khrushchev announced that war was not fatalistically inevitable, but this did not mean that the Soviet Union could relax its war efforts. Quite the reverse, for armed conflict was avoidable only if the correlation of forces between the socialist and the capitalist states could be so weighted in favour of the Soviet Union and its allies that the cost of waging all-out war would prove too prohibitive to the capitalist nations. Although war was not therefore inevitable, it was always possible, and the Soviet Union and its allies had to be prepared to fight and win. Nuclear armaments increased the cost of military preparation, and the Soviet Union had to match the capitalist states and allocate resource for nuclear research, production and deployment. Even in the nuclear age, however, wars would be waged by mass armies, so that resources for nuclear weaponry could not be obtained by reducing outlays on conventional weapons. The Soviet Union had to plan for and finance a balanced array of armaments, and after China turned from being an ally to an ideological foe, to deploy on both the Western and Eastern fronts. Soviet assessment of what it understood to be the aggressive ambitions of ideological