2 The Political Context of Deterrence

THE WARSAW PACT

The traditional focus of any debate on the scale and nature of a security threat, and over the appropriate level of provision to counter it, lies in the distinction between capabilities and intentions. The military customarily lay particular emphasis on capabilities. They are conscious that in the last resort they may have to put their preparations into practice, and that at that moment it will be the actual numbers of men and equipment and their quality, rather than any prior estimate of intentions, that will determine the outcome. They argue that intentions can change overnight, while the build-up of capabilities may require years of endeavour. Finance Ministries, equally understandably, lay greater emphasis on intentions. They point out the impracticality of insuring against every conceivable threat, and indeed the undesirability of so doing, not merely because of the opportunity cost of such expenditure in terms of wider national interests but also from the danger of fuelling an unproductive arms race. They stress that in selecting the proper level of defence expenditure nations should be guided not by judgements as to what a potential adversary could do, but what, on a rational assessment of his national interests, it is likely that he will do.

Mr Gorbachev’s accession to power has made the difficulty of balancing these two perspectives particularly acute. In any analysis of a society as opaque as that of the Soviet Union it is never easy to make judgements. It does, however, appear that under Mr Gorbachev the need for internal economic reform has almost entirely eclipsed other political considerations. This springs from a perception that the rigidities of the social and economic structure of the country, the detailed central direction of industry administered through an ossified bureaucracy of place-holders, was not only failing to deliver the promised triumph of the social system over capitalism but was actually falling further behind. In tackling this death through inertia
of the socialist idea Mr Gorbachev seems prepared to challenge the accepted internal conventions: to devolve authority to local institutions and the individual plants, and to introduce such radical concepts as competition, marketing and conceivably even bankruptcy. Furthermore, all this is being pursued at break-neck pace. A factory manager who was required hitherto merely to produce a predetermined quantity of a centrally specified product for others to distribute in accordance with externally established norms, will now be required to assess his market, determine the level of production and the precise nature of his product, price and market it; to do this without any relevant training; and to have made the transition within three years. Even if this can be achieved – and certainly the time-scale would seem grossly overoptimistic – there must inescapably be appalling problems of transition, both economic and social, before the dividends of the new regime become available.

Such a fundamental recasting of the internal structure of the country is an unlikely springboard from which to embark on military adventures. Mr Gorbachev seems rather to require a period of external tranquillity to allow him to concentrate upon 'restructuring' without extraneous diversions. Two considerations reinforce this view. The acquisition of Western technological expertise could do much to alleviate the traumas of transition. Mr Gorbachev is unlikely to wish gratuitously to encourage the opponents of technology transfer by seeming to pose a military threat. Secondly, his internal reforms are not being received with unanimous enthusiasm by his Warsaw Pact allies, many of whom face severe political and economic difficulties of their own. To embark on a policy of increased hostility to the West at a time of internal stress within the Pact would seem, to say the least, imprudent. In sum, a convincing case can be made that Mr Gorbachev has no intention of seeking overt confrontation with the West, for some years at least; and it can be further argued that the more open society that his reforms will demand, and the greater economic interdependence with the West that his economic proposals seem likely to generate, make the already improbable scenario of war in Europe so unlikely a possibility as to be safely disregarded.

Proponents of such a viewpoint may pray in aid of Mr Gorbachev's espousal of, and close personal involvement with, a multiplicity of arms control initiatives. Hardly a month has passed without some new proposal, or the adoption and recirculation of an earlier Western