6 The Invisibles of Power

It is impossible to obtain possession of a great country with European civilisation otherwise than by aid of internal division.

Karl von Clausewitz

Look where your vulnerabilities are, and there you will find the KGB.

Stanislaw Levchenko
(former official, KGB First Chief Directorate)

A Russian saying has it that Russia will never start a war, but will wage peace so vigorously that no stone will be left standing upon another. Her method and style of ‘waging peace’ bear more than a passing resemblance to her manner of waging war: a strategy which aims to exploit weakness rather than match strength, a premium placed on intelligence and on the centralised control of one’s forces, the transfer of the locus of fighting to the enemy rear, and the ‘combined and systematic utilisation of all means available’. The answer to Lenin’s question, ‘when to choose peace, when to choose war?’ hinges upon which is more vulnerable, the opponent’s society or his armed forces. In Afghanistan society is a bed of nails; in Europe, the United States and much of the developing world it is a soft target.

If one difference stands out between the Soviet approach to peace and to war, it is the urgency perceived that war in its modern form be short. In contrast, the struggle to adjust the correlation of forces by peaceful means is perceived by necessity, but also by strategic choice, to be a long-term affair, intense and sustained though it must be as well. The USSR well appreciates the force of what might be called the Falklands or Pearl Harbor effect in ‘bourgeois democracies’: when challenges are clear, offensive, and direct, public opinion and even ‘inveterate peace mongers’ move to the right of governments themselves perceived to be of the right (a phenomenon which certainly could be observed in the United States when KAL flight 007 was shot down and the Reagan Administration suddenly found itself to the left of public opinion). But the long-term and indirect approach does not arouse the collective indignation of Western society; rather, it brings
out other characteristics nurtured by our culture, our civic tolerance, and our democratic institutions: a short attention span, impatience for result and for 'progress', and various morally loaded values associated with the idea of 'peace': its association with cooperation rather than struggle, and with private virtues and comforts rather than with vigilance, duty and sacrifice. Understanding is seen as tantamount to agreement. Negotiation between Superpowers is thought of as a form of therapy - a slow incubation of moderation, goodwill and trust - between parties who have become unnecessarily and dangerously estranged. We need hardly reiterate that the CPSU do not see it in this way.

The professional foreign policy establishments of Europe and North America do not see it in this way either. But the professionals are, for professional reasons, often inclined to deprecate the less conventional side of Soviet activity and equate Soviet foreign policy with Soviet diplomacy.

In the old school diplomatic world, 'pragmatism' is widely taken to be the measure of seriousness. Self-proclaimed ideologies are frequently treated as smokescreens for 'national interests' or as the nostrums of those who have not matured fully. There is the hope that responsibility civilises, and that if 'legitimate demands' are met, radicals will become reluctant conservatives. Like corporate oligopolists, much of the foreign policy establishment conceives of diplomacy as a means of 'adjusting interests', not as a method of struggle: we all want to 'maximise our influence', but in the end we all settle for what we can get. The professionals no more yearn for a diplomacy 'beyond power politics' any more than corporate obligarchs expect their labours to produce a market without competition. They are tough bargainers; they know the value of things; they will not give away solid assets for gestures of goodwill. But 'pragmatism' tends to be the Realpolitik of the short term, the code of practice of the conservative in a world of clubbable rivals. It frequently produces a willingness to deal with issues 'on their merits': however, in diplomacy as in battle, one can win every tactical engagement and lose the war.1

The business of diplomacy is communication between states. It is natural for diplomats to equate international relations with interstate relations, or at least assume that non-state relations are private in character or of secondary importance. The orthodox diplomatic order, and the legal order underpinning it, draws a strict demarcation line between internal and international politics. The Soviet regime, as we have seen, compartmentalises international politics into a 'social' and