Soviet Military Power and Global Influence

the very knowledge of a Soviet military presence in an area in which a conflict situation is developing may serve to restrain the imperialists.

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Chapter 5 showed how the USSR has developed impressive nuclear and conventional military capabilities to support its war aims against what it perceives as a range of credible military contingencies. There is more, of course, to Soviet military power than the development of a military machine for ultimate use in war. Military power is used for projecting influence overseas, for underpinning the Soviet Union’s Superpower status, and for bringing about through the use of force – or the threat of its use – developments favourable to Soviet state interests.

Military power is central to the USSR’s position as a global power. As one Soviet commentator has put it – ‘the military strength of a state is by all means a decisive element of its position in the world’. The Soviet Union’s military strength is its prime achievement and it has learned that military power generates international respect and deference, which might not be accorded to the Soviet regime on the basis of its performance in other areas of international competition. For the first time in its history, the USSR is accepted now as a genuinely global power based on its attainment of strategic nuclear parity with the US, its largescale conventional military capabilities in both the European and Far Eastern theatres, its development of power projection forces which operate regularly in such distant areas as the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the South Atlantic, and its worldwide network of security assistance programmes. In the last decade or so, the USSR’s ability to intervene in such remote parts of the world as Angola and the Horn of Africa and provide...
military support in Indochina and Central America give substance to its claims to be treated as a global power.

When Andrei Gromyko told the delegates to the Twenty-Fourth Party Congress in 1971 that ‘Today, there is no question of any significance which can be decided without the Soviet Union or in opposition to her’, it was generally seen in the West as a new arrogance of power based on perceptions of a general shift in the military balance in favour of the USSR. But as Helmut Sonnenfeldt was to observe a few years later, the USSR is only just acquiring the habit of defining its interests on a global rather than on a solely continental basis. Over the years, the Soviet leadership has experienced failures as well as successes in their new-found global role. They have discovered that in some respects the very possession of military power has worked against the USSR’s foreign policy interests.

There is a tendency in the West to perceive Soviet military power as the perfectly matched complement of the USSR’s political strategy. Yet neither in their writings nor their actions, does the Soviet leadership appear to have worked out an integration of military force and foreign policy comparable with that of the US. That there are temptations deriving from the USSR’s increased military power cannot be denied. To infer from that premise, however, that the Soviet leadership has any confidence in the inherent superiority of military power as an instrument of foreign policy is another matter. For almost thirty years now, the Soviet Union has found that using military power to influence changes favourable to Soviet state interests has yielded uncertain results. Experience has taught the leadership in the Kremlin that the international situation is complex and uncertain and offers no guarantee of gains, even for a Superpower.

6.1 THE CONCEPT OF MILITARY POWER AND INFLUENCE

The focus here is not Soviet military power as such, but the conjunction of military power and political purpose, which is less often understood. Much of the current Western literature on the Soviet Union tends to be captivated almost exclusively by the facts of the USSR’s military forces – their weapons, disposition and worldwide activities. As important as an understanding of these matters is, it