SOVIET UNION: CONCERN ABOUT A SURPRISE NATO ATTACK

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This paper considers whether specific options exist for minimising the risk of Soviet misinterpretation of NATO Command Post Exercises (CPXs), particularly nuclear ones. Although it has been prepared in the context of an unprecedented Soviet reaction to Able Archer 83 and other reports of alleged concern about a surprise NATO attack (JIC(84)(N)45), the paper examines the inherent advantages and disadvantages of prior notification of nuclear CPXs as an overall Confidence Building Measure (CBM).

2. 

3. Although the JIC reached no firm conclusion, we cannot discount the possibility that at least some Soviet officials/officers may have misinterpreted Able Archer 83 and possibly other nuclear CPXs as posing a real threat. Quite apart from their reaction to Able Archer and If their response involves the taking of actual precautions against what
they judge to be threatening and ambiguous warning indicators, should we seek to establish a system which makes the holding of high level nuclear CPXs subject to an obligation to notify in advance? Should the practice of promoting military transparency through Confidence Building Measures be extended from field exercises and the movement of actual forces to CPXs themselves? Provided a proposal can be assembled which does not constrain nuclear CPX activity, (which is militarily vital for the training of commanders and their staffs in extremely complicated procedures), could there be advantage in exploring this with the Russians?

II SUBJECTS FOR NEGOTIATION

4. While an element of uncertainty is implicit in the concept of deterrence, it is assumed that there is mutual benefit in ensuring that each side does not misconstrue the other's CPXs as posing a real threat. Since certain notification measures relating to test ICBM launches already exist for reducing the possibility of misinterpretation (SALT II, Chapter XVI) there seems no inherent reason why similar procedures could not be devised which extended to certain nuclear CPXs as well. Prior warning of field exercises has become an accepted feature of the conventional arms control process, and as such, could be capable
of expansion, although not perhaps within existing fora (see paragraph 7 below). It is for discussion whether notification of nuclear CPXs would have to be balanced (the reciprocal nature of conventional notification is an important factor which needs to be taken into account) or whether notification might be asymmetric or even unilateral.

5. It is also for discussion what CPXs might be notified and the extent of information which might be provided. It may for example be asked whether awareness of the existence of a nuclear CPX would of itself generate confidence. In our view simple notification could indeed be effective in reassuring the other side if it was given sufficiently far in advance to make it clear that such exercises formed a normal pattern of activity and took place in relative isolation from the changing temperature of political relationships between the major powers. It might prove possible to construct notification in such a way as to avoid giving details of particular scenarios or inhibit in any way US or NATO exercises.

6. Although the Russians appear to have reacted in an unprecedented way to the NATO exercise Able Archer 83,

This, coupled with the fact that the Soviet Union is the only nuclear power in the Warsaw Pact, indicates that super-power nuclear CPXs should form the centrepiece of any notification procedure, supplemented perhaps on the West's side with notification of NATO-wide exercises involving a substantial American nuclear role. We do not consider that every exercise
involving simulated nuclear release would require notification

In the immediate future it might be enough to attempt early discussions with the Russians.

III  FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION

7.

There may be a requirement for speed. This effectively rules out most of the existing arms control negotiations as suitable fora since discussion of CBMs in any of these is likely to be unduly prolonged (MBFR), complicated by an involvement of extraneous participants (CDE, CSCE) or indefinitely delayed (START). A number of existing bilateral US/USSR agreements theoretically provide a framework ('hotline' agreements 1963/71, Article XVI of SALT II or Prevention of Nuclear War Agreement 1973), but none of them seem easily adaptable to current requirements.

8. An ad hoc forum may therefore be required. A special contact between the US and the USSR seems the most practical
option in terms of speed, simplicity and security. Although it was a NATO CPX about which the Soviets appear to have been concerned, prior consultation within a NATO forum, although we could fully justify attempts to increase confidence about nuclear matters and anticipate considerable support for such efforts, on balance the search for CBMs is likely to be more effectively pursued. However recent experience suggests that a bilateral discussion involving possible notification of NATO and US national nuclear CPXs is unlikely to cause problems within the Alliance. Strengthen the case for discussion of CBMs relating to Command Post Exercises, specifically nuclear ones, to be conducted bilaterally between the United States and the Soviet Union.

9. The President’s Commission on Strategic Forces (the Scowcroft Report, 21 March 1984) proposes a bilateral exchange.
information between US and Soviet Defence officials about steps which could be misconstrued as indications of an attack. The Report proposes that a variety of measures should be constructed to improve communication and predictability which would 'contribute to stability by improving mutual understanding and reducing surprise and misinterpretation'. It is our view that should be acted upon as soon as possible.