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PERCEIVED VERSUS REAL STRENGTH OF AMERICA'S STRATEGIC FORCES

by

MAXWELL D. TAYLOR

In the course of the SALT debates there have been frequent references to the importance of having strategic forces with both real and perceived strength. Typical examples are the following:

Secretary of Defense Harold Brown:

Our highest military priority includes . . . maintaining the perception . . . and the reality that US forces are as capable as those of the USSR, that there is no level of nuclear conflict at which the USSR could gain a military or a political advantage. . . . In addition to their military capabilities, our forces, strategic and non-nuclear, must be and be recognized to be at least on a par with those of the Soviet Union. We need forces of size and character so that we, the Soviets and Third Countries perceive that we cannot be coerced or intimidated by larger or more capable Soviet forces.

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance:

We have to deal with the issue of perception—what other nations will think about the relative power of the two superpowers. The NATO powers are concerned about perception.

From these and similar views expressed by other governmental spokesmen, one concludes that our leaders believe it essential for our strategic forces to have two kinds of strength, real and perceived. Both are deemed necessary to impress upon the Soviets, our allies, and ourselves the essential equivalence

of our military capabilities with those of the Soviet Union, and our consequent immunity to intimidation or coercion by Soviet strategic strength.

Thus far, no authoritative source has undertaken to explain the difference between real and perceived strength. Are they distinctly different or merely two aspects of a composite entity, national military strength, which in turn is a component of total national strength? In contrast to real strength, is perceived strength an illusion—something of the stuff that dreams are made of? This latter point is important because many critics will be inclined to suspect that perceived strength is nothing more than a polite name for fictitious strength, an insubstantial creation with no real capability for putting blood on an enemy shirt. If perceived strength is to be regarded as an essential attribute of our strategic forces, it is important to remove this suspicion of make-believe.

Before undertaking to answer such questions, we must agree as to the meaning of the principal terms, beginning with real strategic strength. I take it to mean that form of military power characterized by an ability to destroy major Soviet targets, military and civil, with nuclear weapons at intercontinental ranges. The destruction potential of the forces providing this capability depends upon three interdependent factors: the performance and survivability of US strategic weapons and associated equipment; the courage and character of the American leaders responsible for decisions affecting their use; and the reliability and survivability of the command, control, and communications systems linking political

leaders and military commanders with the weapons.

Such strength is real if its ability to destroy targets is a fact that the Soviet Union and other nations must recognize and take into serious account in their dealings with the United States. To produce this effect, real strength must be to some degree perceptible to the observers whom it impresses, deters, or intimidates by its destructive power.

Perceived strength is much more difficult to define. A tentative definition, based on the quotations from Secretaries Brown and Vance above, would be that perceived strength (in contrast to real strength, which is essentially destruction potential) is the net impression of strength which the appearance of our strategic forces creates in the national minds of the Soviet Union, the US, and perhaps other countries. But such a definition leaves open such questions as what constitutes this appearance and how it affects national minds so that they form appropriate perceptions of our strategic strength in a timely manner. Also, what is a national mind?

Without benefit of authoritative answers, I would say that among the elements entering into any composite perception of our strength, the perceptible part of our real strength would make the most important contribution. On the other hand, perceptible weaknesses casting doubt upon the effectiveness of our weaponry or the readiness of our leaders to use them would be the most important negative factors. Furthermore, in view of the notorious unreliability of human perception, we may expect outside appraisers of our strength to commit frequent mistakes resulting from misinformation, careless or selective observation, misinterpretation, and individual bias. Thus, perceived strength would seem to be a complex, widely shared impression generated or influenced by perceptible real strength, apparent weaknesses, and observer errors.

But who are these observers and appraisers who receive this impression and how do their

individual impressions become part of a national mind? To avoid a philosophical morass, I would merely say that for practical purposes the appraisers with whom we are most concerned are, in first priority, the decisionmakers of the Soviet Union, the US, and our allies—and, in second priority, the shapers of public opinion in these countries (recognizing, of course, that public opinion in the Soviet Union counts for little). If these individuals can be induced to view our strength as we hope they will, we need not concern ourselves directly with national minds.

But we must decide what views we want them to take. Our concern about our perceived strength arises from a fear that the other powerful countries will underestimate our strength to the detriment of its political and deterrent value. This is a legitimate apprehension arising in part from the undue weight many world leaders attach to numbers of weapons as a primary measure of strategic strength—thereby repeating the numbers fallacy which underlies and vitiates SALT II. Since this measure ignores such important factors of US strength as the accuracy, reliability, and survivability of weapons, there is a strong possibility that in the eyes of the addicts of the fallacy, we will not appear as strong as we really are. Surely our perceived strength should be no less than our real strength—indeed, we would like it to be greater if such were possible at a reasonable cost.

Our task then is to bring national decisionmakers and opinion-shapers to perceive the real strength of the US and preferably something more. The difficulty in accomplishing this task will vary in rough proportion to their knowledge of strategic forces in general and the capabilities of US forces in particular.

The leaders of the Soviet Union might be expected to know very nearly all that is knowable about our strategic pluses and minuses, and thus it would be difficult to mislead them by any contrivance of phony strength. The errors they make in their evaluations are likely to result from such factors as misjudgments of American

psychology in time of crisis (recall Khrushchev and the Cuban missile crisis), failure to anticipate American progress in military technology, and their own observer errors and biases which may be massive. In general, there is no reason to believe that Soviet leaders will be impressed by anything other than hard evidence of real strength.

As to US and NATO political leaders, it would be as serious a fault for them to overrate our strength as to underrate it. Our objective should be to assure that they fully understand both our strengths and weaknesses in the hope they will join hands in exploiting the former and correcting the latter. A first step should be to purge them of the numbers fallacy and assure their understanding of destruction potential as the true measure of strategic strength.

The opinion-shapers—media, politicians, academicians, columnists, and propagandists—of many countries will always play an important role in the formation of popular perceptions of American strength. These sources, exploiting mass communications, are capable of generating a host of truths, half-truths, and untruths regarding our strategic capabilities, which then become the basis for lay perception. The public opinion that results, far from being a consensus of informed and harmonized views, is little more than a jumble of individual beliefs derived from multiple sources of variable reliability and uncertain identity. Under the circumstances, the best we can hope to accomplish is to provide the opinion-shapers with the facts necessary for their clear understanding of the vast destructiveness of our forces and the inevitability of their use if attacked.

Thus far, we have been concerned primarily with the perception of our strategic weaponry by selected observers and evaluators. To round out the discussion, we should consider how our perceived strength is affected by the actions of those American leaders who control the weapons, assign missions, and give or withhold the order to fire. The behavior of such men, especially that of the President, is subject to continuous scrutiny and appraisal by critics worldwide,

who seek to identify character and personality traits likely to affect conduct in a nuclear confrontation. Since his fellow Americans are the harshest and most vocal critics of the President and his associates, their views will exercise great influence on foreign opinion regarding US leadership. NATO chiefs, always concerned about the internal state of our nation, are particularly alert to any indications of American weaknesses, which when found, magnify the misgivings of our allies regarding our will and capability to resist the Soviet drive for global leadership.

By this time, we should be ready to review our tentative definition of perceived strength, modifying it in the light of the foregoing considerations. It now appears to consist essentially of a major component of perceptible real strength, offset by perceived weaknesses and distorted by perceiver error, illusion, or bias. Thus viewed, perceived strength is less than real strength by virtue of the relative imperceptibility of such positive factors as the quality and survivability of US weapons and communications, and the

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advanced technological developments emerging in future military programs. It is further reduced by the negative effect of perceived weaknesses, not merely those in the strategic field, but also in such disparate factors as the reputation of our leadership, the size and readiness of our conventional military forces, the state of the economy, and our national unity. Perceiver errors may be either positive or negative in their effect on net perceived strength, although they are more likely to be negative, if only because of our national inclination toward destructive criticism of ourselves and our institutions.

In summary, it would seem that perceived strength overlaps but is not congruent with real strength and that it is likely to appear inferior to it. Furthermore, it is certain to appear inferior to Soviet perceived strength for at least three reasons. First, the perceptible real strength of the Soviet forces includes more and bigger counterforce missiles with greater throw-weight than US forces. Second, whereas we exhibit many visible weaknesses to the detriment of our national image, Soviet flaws are generally well concealed from foreign eyes and ears by police-state procedures and the suppression of domestic criticism. Finally, we cannot match the record of Soviet leaders in the ruthless use of military force to achieve political purposes or that of the Soviet nation in steadfastness and will to sacrifice in time of war—records of great value in establishing the credibility of military power. If the above views are correct, we may never achieve the parity in perceived strength that we have taken as an essential requirement of strategic adequacy.

Fortunately, we can offset these disadvantages to a certain extent if we are willing to make the effort and pay the price. We can augment the perception of our real strength by testifying loudly, publicly, and truthfully to the adequacy of our existing strategic forces to cope with any missions they may be assigned. Further, we can try to reduce some of the visible weaknesses that detract from our perceived strength.

While many of the imperceptible aspects of our real strength should remain concealed in

the national interest, we have every reason to publicize the truth regarding the destruction potential of our forces in relation to their tasks. We should openly advertise our unqualified confidence in their ability to destroy all likely Soviet targets after sustaining the losses to be expected from a Soviet first strike. To give realism to the magnitude of their awesome power, we could express the expected Soviet losses from our retaliation in multiples of those Soviet losses suffered in World War II, stressing that today they would occur within four hours rather than in four years.

For some reason, we have been reluctant to proclaim these and similar chilling facts, preferring to reinforce our perceived strength by adding weapons to our arsenal primarily for the sake of matching Soviet numbers. Although such weapons usually are unnecessary for military purposes, they are defended for their psychological or political value in bolstering our own confidence or that of allies. Also, it has been argued that such weapons provide an added safety factor in a form of warfare for which there are no experience tables and further that they might be useful as bargaining counters in future negotiations.

Personally, I am unalterably opposed in principle to using military resources for any purpose that does not contribute, directly or indirectly, to the performance of some essential military task. Strategic forces have a single task—the destruction of a finite number of targets. Weapons acquired solely or largely to enhance the appearance of strength are objectionable at least on two grounds: they may delude ourselves and our friends as to our true strength, and they cause a costly diversion of resources from more urgent and legitimate needs.

As a final argument against the acquisition of psychologically motivated weapons, I would point out that there is a far better way to improve not only perceived but real power as well—the elimination or moderation of perceptible national weaknesses. To remedy the greatest

defect in our strategic posture, we can take urgent measures to reduce our dependence on land-based ICBMs without awaiting the operational readiness of a new MX mobile ICBM in the late 1980's. To increase our readiness to project military force abroad to counter Soviet expansionism and assure access to vital overseas markets, we can launch new programs to modernize and increase our non-nuclear forces, particularly the naval forces needed to guarantee freedom of essential sea lanes in peace and war. To be seen able to perform such tasks, our forces must have a war-sustaining capability based upon a substantial reserve of both equipment and trained manpower, the latter possible only after a return to some form of conscription. All such actions would require the maintenance of much larger military budgets over a decade or so—an unpleasant thought for politicians and taxpayers alike, but an essential action to give convincing evidence of the national will to restore our military strength and resume our former role of world leadership.

In the economic arena, it would greatly improve our posture of strength if our statesmen took prompt and effective actions to decrease our fatal dependence on imports. After the manner of John Foster Dulles in welding a chain of alliances around the Sino-Soviet bloc for its military containment after

World War II, our diplomats should make a similar effort now to conclude long-term economic treaties with reliable trading partners capable of satisfying our pressing needs for scarce raw materials and thereby lessening our vassalage to OPEC and any future cartels.

It is in the domestic field that we have the greatest possibilities for gaining strength by reducing weakness. Our task is to do now some of the unpleasant things left undone over the last 20 years—national programs for the conservation of energy and the development of new energy sources, a reduced dependence on imports, the recruitment of our best citizens for public service, the purging of minority factionalism, and the revival of national unity and purpose. If we could achieve only a few of these goals, even in part, we would not be reduced in the future to landing Marines at Guantanamo to prove our strength of spirit. Nor would we feel obliged to expend billions to achieve numerical weapons parity with the Soviets in the hope of gaining a fictitious status symbol to reinforce our perceived strength. By having added to the reality of our strength and thereby to its appearance as well, we could henceforth allay our concern over perceived strength and forego its pursuit as an objective in itself.

