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The nuclear war scare of 1983 How serious was it?

Paul Dibb

Thirty years ago, the Soviet Union and the United States stood on the brink of nuclear war. The Communist Party leadership in Moscow was convinced that Washington was about to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike, which would require a massive nuclear response.

There was a series of crises in 1983 concerning the deployment by both the USSR and the US of highly accurate theatre nuclear weapons in Europe, President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (the SDI, or 'Star Wars'), the Soviet Union's shooting down of a Korean civilian airliner, and above all a major NATO exercise called 'Able Archer', which Moscow saw as a deception (*maskirovka*) for the countdown to nuclear war. Nuclear weapons were loaded onto Warsaw Pact aircraft for delivery at short notice once the order was given, such was the alarm in Soviet decision-making circles.

Like most disasters, this one would have resulted from a confluence of errors and misperceptions. In this case it was the profound distrust between the two sides, a sequence of preliminary events that included the shooting down of the airliner, and—perhaps most importantly—an intelligence failure on the behalf of the US. That such a situation could come about after three decades of Cold War, with all the elaborate mechanisms that had been hammered out over the years, is sobering. It's worth understanding what happened—and what could have been done to avoid it—when we contemplate the growing strategic competition between the nuclear-armed US and China in our region today. The serious message to be taken from this paper is that we shouldn't be complacent when it comes to contemplating the risk of nuclear weapons being used one day.

The serious risk in 1983

It's conventional wisdom these days to assert that in the Cold War there was only one occasion when there was a serious risk of nuclear conflict, and that was the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Robert Gates, who was Deputy Director of the CIA at the time, describes 1983 as a year in which the Soviets truly thought that the danger of war was high.¹ He states that this was the period when the levels of tension and the risk of miscalculation—of each side misreading the other—were at their highest.² Cuba was undoubtedly an intense crisis over very high stakes, but both sides knew they were in a crisis situation and they each had broadly the same facts at their disposal. Able Archer could have triggered the ultimate unintended catastrophe, and with prompt nuclear strike capacities on both the US and Soviet sides orders of magnitude greater than in 1962.

I visited both Washington and Moscow twice in 1983, and not only were tensions high in each capital but there was a real sense of war fever being whipped up in Moscow. The Russians feared that, in Marxist terms, 'the correlation of world forces' was decisively running against them.³ This was after a period in the 1970s when they seemed to be prevailing in economic and military strength and had made geopolitical gains in such places as Afghanistan and Angola—while the US had been defeated in Vietnam. Now, their economy was faltering badly, agriculture was a mess and the arms race with America was proving to be astronomically expensive.

Even so, from a US perspective the USSR's military strength was formidable and in Washington there was a perception of a missile gap that simply had to be closed. By 1983, the Soviet Union had 7,300 strategic nuclear warheads capable

of delivering over 6,000 megatons of nuclear explosives, giving it an advantage in terms of ‘throw-weight’ of 2.65 to 1 over the US.⁴ With this sized force, Moscow would have been capable of delivering 4,000 nuclear warheads—some of which had 20-megaton warheads—onto the US and reducing the American population by half (more than 120 million people) and the country’s industrial base by 70% in the first 24 hours, and still have 3,000 strategic nuclear warheads left over for striking America’s allies in Western Europe and Japan, as well as China. In addition, the Soviets had deployed more than 360 of their new SS-20 theatre-range ballistic missiles capable of targeting all of Western Europe and each carrying three 150-kiloton warheads (the Hiroshima bomb was only 15 kilotons).⁵

By comparison, in the Cuban missile crisis the USSR had only four operational ICBM launchers and it was not until 1964 that it deployed submarine-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles (SLBMs).⁶ Thus, Moscow had to rely on the highly risky ploy of deploying medium- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba in order to target the US. Twenty years later, in 1983, the CIA’s top-secret National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), *Soviet capabilities for strategic nuclear conflict 1982–92*, described the USSR as being capable of mounting massive pre-emptive nuclear attacks and seeking ‘superior capabilities to fight and win a nuclear war with the United States’.⁷

This brings us to the worst-case mirror-image situation in 1983: the Soviet leadership had convinced itself that it was in fact the Americans who were seeking to gain nuclear war-fighting superiority. Washington, however, believed that it had to reverse the potentially dangerous erosion of the credibility of its strategic nuclear deterrent that had resulted from the massive expansion and modernisation of Soviet strategic forces during the 1970s. But as far as Moscow was concerned, the Americans were now throwing down the gauntlet with their technological development of the MX ICBM and the D-5 Trident SLBM, both of which promised to be very accurate and hard-target-capable, so posing a threat to the survivability of the Soviet Union’s land-based ICBM nuclear forces.

In 1983, the Americans began deployments in Western Europe of the Pershing II intermediate-range nuclear ballistic missile (IRBM), which had a flight time to Moscow from West Germany of 4–6 minutes in what was termed ‘a super-sudden first strike’ capability.⁸ These highly accurate IRBMs were capable of destroying Soviet hard targets, including command-and-control bunkers and missile silos. In a crisis, the Soviet leadership itself could be attacked with

little or no warning, and therefore it would have to consider striking at the Pershing launch sites before being struck by the US missiles. The USSR was at this time also trying to develop a semi-automated launch system, called ‘Perimeter’, which was designed to authorise massive nuclear retaliation electronically if the leadership were all killed.⁹

The Evil Empire vs. Star Wars

In March 1983, what the Soviets saw as two highly provocative statements came from President Reagan. On 8 March, Reagan, speaking to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, described the Soviet Union as an ‘evil empire’. For the Soviet Communist leadership, this meant that Washington was seeking to deny them their legitimacy as a major power of co-equal status with the US. The speech in Orlando would stick in the throats of the Soviets for many years to come.

Two weeks later, on 23 March, Reagan went on national television from the Oval Office to announce the SDI to counter the Soviet Union’s growing strategic offensive force with an impermeable defensive shield against ballistic missile attack.¹⁰ If this worked, it would negate over a quarter of a century of Soviet offensive nuclear programs and require an expensive response at a time of deep economic crisis in the USSR.

The Soviet leadership had apparently convinced itself that America could in fact build such a defensive nuclear umbrella—as unlikely as that was recognised to be by many experts in the US. Moscow was faced with the potential threat of a highly expensive new arms race in an area in which it could not hope to compete. First Deputy Defence Minister and Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, acknowledged at the time that the USSR would never be able to catch up with the US in modern arms until it had an economic revolution.¹¹ Just at the moment when it had arguably achieved nuclear parity with America, the paranoid Soviet leadership—led by former KGB chief Yuri Andropov—feared it would be faced with the development of a new system that would allow the US to destroy the USSR with a first strike while sitting securely under its ‘Star Wars’ umbrella.

Andropov lashed out four days after the President’s announcement and accused Reagan of ‘inventing new plans on how to unleash a nuclear war ... with the hope of winning it’.¹² His accusations were unprecedented, and he was telling his nation that the world was on the verge of a nuclear war.



President Reagan addresses the nation on 23 March 1983, about the development of a space-age shield to intercept Soviet missiles. © Bettmann/CORBIS

The Soviets shoot down KAL-007

The next crisis came on 1 September 1983, when a Soviet Su-15 fighter fired two air-to-air missiles at a Korean Airlines Boeing 747 airliner, Flight 007, destroying the aircraft and killing all 269 passengers. The plane had strayed off course from the US to Seoul and crossed into Soviet territory over the Kamchatka Peninsula, where a major strategic nuclear submarine base was located. The order to shoot down the airliner was given as it was about to leave Soviet airspace after flying over Sakhalin Island. The shoot-down was viewed in the US as a stark demonstration of the callous brutality of the Soviet regime: President Reagan called it ‘an act of barbarism’ and Secretary of State George Schultz denounced it as deliberate mass murder.¹³ President Reagan used the KAL-007 shoot-down to persuade Congress to support his request for increased defence spending and the new silo-busting MX ICBM.

The Soviet response was to accuse the US of a deliberate act of intelligence provocation, claiming the aircraft had been identified as a US electronic intelligence collection platform—an RC-135 (Cobra Ball) reconnaissance plane. In a briefing to the media, First Deputy Defence Minister Ogarkov insisted

that the real blame for the tragedy lay with the US, not the USSR. Andropov asserted that an ‘outrageous military psychosis’ had overtaken the US.¹⁴ Stung by the US portrayal of their actions as barbaric, the Soviet leadership persuaded themselves it was all a provocation warranting a tough response. They saw Washington’s official rhetoric as adding further stresses to an already very strained relationship. As a result, there was real fear building in Moscow that the situation was so bad that war might result.

US intelligence spooks the Soviets

Subsequent information from the Center for the Study of Intelligence in the CIA, made available to me in 1997, confirms that a US RC-135 had been in the area earlier that day, monitoring an expected Soviet ICBM test. At a National Security Council meeting with President Reagan the day after the shoot-down, CIA Director Bill Casey confirmed that, while there had been no reconnaissance planes in the area of the attack, ‘That is not to say that confusion between the US reconnaissance plane and the KAL plane could not have developed as the Cobra Ball departed and the Korean airliner approached the area north-east of the

Kamchatka Peninsula.¹⁵ Robert Gates states in his book *From the shadows*, published in 1996, that the majority of CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency analysts believed that the Soviets on the ground misidentified the plane and that the US administration's rhetoric outran the facts that were known to it.¹⁶ He concludes that some US officials got carried away and some—such as Secretary of State George Schultz—just didn't believe what the CIA was telling them.

One matter that Gates doesn't mention (but to which as deputy director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation I was privy) is that a similar incident involving a Korean airliner had occurred in 1978. In that year, KAL Flight 902 from Paris to Seoul via Alaska violated Soviet airspace by turning abruptly 180 degrees south-east from the North Pole, apparently due to a major failure of its navigation calculations and, instead of continuing north to Alaska, passed over the Kola Peninsula and the Soviet naval base at Murmansk. On that occasion, Soviet fighters forced the aircraft to land on a frozen lake in Soviet Karelia. The Korean airliner was impounded by the Soviets; the passengers were allowed to return home, but the crew were detained and the airline fined for violating Soviet airspace.¹⁷ The incident was a major embarrassment to Soviet air defence because Flight 902 had already entered Soviet territory before it was intercepted. This led to a toughening up in air defence command arrangements, which led to the disastrous shooting down of KAL-007 in 1983.

Earlier in 1983, in April and May, the US Pacific Fleet had held its largest exercise ever in the north-west Pacific. Forty ships, including three aircraft carrier battle groups, sailed within 720 kilometres of the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Soviet ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) base at Petropavlovsk. US attack submarines and antisubmarine aircraft conducted operations in protected areas ('bastions') where the Soviet Navy regularly stationed several of its nuclear-powered SSBNs. Also, aircraft from the carriers *Medway* and *Enterprise* carried out a simulated bombing run over a military installation on the small Soviet-occupied island of Zelenny in the Kuril island chain north of Japan.¹⁸

The purpose of these naval and air probes near Soviet borders wasn't so much to signal US military intentions to the Soviets as to keep them guessing as to what might come next from US psychological warfare operations (PSYOPs).¹⁹ These operations also probed for gaps and vulnerabilities in the USSR's early-warning intelligence system. Moscow couldn't ignore their implications for a surprise attack scenario or the gaping holes they exposed in the USSR's ocean surveillance and early warning systems. The fleet exercises in 1983

demonstrated the US's ability to deploy aircraft carrier battle groups close to sensitive Soviet military sites, without being detected or challenged early on.²⁰

The Soviets react to NATO Exercise Able Archer

Now we turn to the last crisis of 1983, which was one of the most dangerous episodes of the Cold War. At the moment of maximum stress in the US–Soviet relationship, it involved a NATO command post exercise called 'Able Archer', which practised nuclear release procedures during the period from 7 to 11 November. Able Archer was the culmination of NATO's annual 'Autumn Forge' exercise from August to mid-November, which involved 60,000 NATO and US troops. As the CIA observed in a review of the evidence in 1997, although the Soviets were familiar with this exercise from previous years, the 1983 version included crucial new changes.²¹ First, the 1983 exercise was planned to involve high-level officials, including the US Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Second, the exercise included a practice drill that took NATO forces through high-spectrum nuclear warfare and a full-scale simulated release of nuclear weapons against the Warsaw Pact. Moreover, the procedures and message formats used in the transition from conventional to nuclear war were different from those used before, and in this exercise the NATO forces went through all of the alert phases from normal readiness to war alert.²²

According to KGB defector Oleg Gordievsky (whom I later met in ASIO in Canberra in 1987), Andropov now had a fixation on the possibility that the US was planning a nuclear first strike against the USSR. He had ordered a top-priority classified intelligence collection program against the West called RYAN (a transliteration of the Russian acronym РЯН for 'nuclear missile attack' or *raketno-yadernoye napadenie*) that called for close observation of all political, military and intelligence activities that might indicate preparations for mobilisation for war. This could occur under cover of an apparently routine military exercise, such as Able Archer. KGB station chiefs (including KGB resident Gordievsky in London) were instructed to obtain information on 'the organisation, location, and functioning mechanism of all forms of communications which are allocated by the adversary for controlling the process of preparing and waging a nuclear war'.²³

Soviet surveillance around US bases in Europe reported changed patterns of officer movement, and alarmist KGB

reporting persuaded the Soviet leadership that there was a real alert involving real troops. Thus ‘the KGB concluded that American forces had been placed on alert— and might even have begun the countdown to nuclear war’, according to Gordievsky.²⁴

This kind of KGB reporting continued throughout the exercise. At the same time, the GRU (Soviet military intelligence) instructed all its posts overseas to obtain early warning of enemy military preparations so that the Soviet Union would not be surprised by the actual onset of war. Soviet military reactions included putting Soviet fighter aircraft in East Germany and Poland on heightened alert and loading them with nuclear weapons.²⁵ Units of the Soviet Fourth Air Army went onto increased readiness, and there was considerable activity by Soviet and other Warsaw Pact forces between 2 and 11 November 1983. In the following days, the Soviets realised that there hadn’t been a mobilisation of NATO forces for war, but until the accession of Gorbachev to power in March 1985 they remained deeply concerned about the US deliberately initiating a surprise nuclear attack.

Despite all this, Gates acknowledges that the CIA didn’t really grasp how alarmed the Soviet leaders might have been until quite some time after the exercise had concluded. It wasn’t until British intelligence issued an assessment in March 1984, reviewing their spy Gordievsky’s reports that the Soviets had taken very seriously the threat of a pre-emptive nuclear strike in 1983 and had thought that nuclear war might have been imminent during Able Archer, that the US became aware of a different view. Even so, official US intelligence assessments in 1984 didn’t take Gordievsky’s warnings seriously, as we shall see. Gates now acknowledges that US intelligence was seriously deficient in 1983–84. He asks whether the US had come close to a nuclear crisis and not even known it. Had the US intelligence community badly misread the state of mind of the Soviet leadership? And had there nearly been a terrible miscalculation?²⁶

Gates says that he now believes the Soviet leadership really did feel that a NATO attack was at least possible and that they took a number of measures to enhance their military readiness. He concludes that the Kremlin did seem to believe that the situation was very dangerous and that US intelligence had failed to grasp the true extent of their anxiety. A re-examination of the whole Able Archer episode by the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in 1990 concluded that the intelligence community’s confidence that this had all been Soviet posturing for political effect was misplaced.²⁷

What are the implications?

What do we learn from all this? First, that in November 1983 the world stood on the edge of the nuclear abyss without our American ally even realising it. This was a frightening case of intelligence failure because of an inability to read the paranoia of the Soviet leadership. In May 1984, a top-secret Special NIE, called *Implications of recent Soviet military-political activities*, reviewed recent Soviet military activities and statements, but—despite the evidence that the CIA had seen from Gordievsky—it continued to argue that ‘the Soviet leadership does not perceive an imminent danger of war.’²⁸

This delusion was defended even though the NIE acknowledged that, since Able Archer in November 1983, there had been a high level of Soviet military activity, including new deployments of weapons and strike forces, large-scale military exercises, unprecedented SS-20 launch activity and large-scale SSBN dispersal.²⁹ This included the first-ever forward deployment, in mid-January 1984, of long-range missile-carrying Delta-class SSBNs and the initiation, in late December 1983, of patrols by E-II nuclear-powered cruise missile submarines off the US coast.³⁰ During the northern hemisphere Spring of 1984 there was also large-scale exercise activity that stressed integrated strategic strike operations featuring multiple missile launches of SS-20s and SLBMs, survivability training (including the dispersal of operational Northern Fleet SSBNs), and the use of nuclear attack survivable command, control and communications platforms.³¹

A much more comprehensive top secret Special NIE, called *Soviet policy toward the United States in 1984*, was issued three months later in August of that year. Its purpose was to address the possibility that the USSR might be preparing for some sort of confrontation with the US. However, again despite the evidence of Gordievsky and other sources, the key judgement remained that the US intelligence community didn’t ‘see in current Soviet political and military behavior preparation for a deliberate major confrontation with the United States in the near future’.³² The NIE repeated its earlier judgement that ‘We strongly believe that Soviet actions are not inspired by, and Soviet leaders do not perceive, a genuine danger of imminent conflict or confrontation with the United States.’ And it went on to assess that it was very unlikely that the Soviets ‘are now preparing for a major war or for confrontation that could lead to a major war’.³³

This isn’t to argue a retrospective case for being soft on the Soviet Union. It needs to be remembered that the USSR was a paranoid and dangerous power with expansionist ambitions

and a brutal human rights record. But what we're analysing here is the realpolitik of nuclear war, not moral or ideological values. The fact is that the failure by the US to interpret intelligence indicators and warnings accurately in 1983 could have led to full-scale nuclear war. Misreading Soviet overreactions as being nothing more than a scare tactic may also have led the West to underestimate another threat—a Soviet pre-emptive nuclear strike, either as a result of miscalculation or by design to alter 'the correlation of forces' decisively in its favour.

By 1983, many in the US were deeply worried: opponents of President Reagan's policies believed that he was in fact increasing the danger of war. After reading Gordievsky's reports, Reagan expressed surprise at the overreaction of the Soviet leadership and asked his National Security Adviser, Robert McFarlane, 'Do you suppose they really believe that? I don't see how they could believe that—but it's something to think about.'³⁴ The doyen of American Soviet experts, George Kennan, was not so naive, exclaiming that the situation had 'the unflinching characteristics of a march towards war—that and nothing else'.³⁵

I note here that the first Australia would have known about all this would have been Soviet nuclear strikes on US facilities at Pine Gap (near Alice Springs), Nurrungar (Woomera) and North West Cape (near Exmouth).³⁶ We know that this was likely because Western spies for the Soviet Union in the late 1970s had given Moscow some insights into the significance of these intelligence and communications facilities for what it saw as US nuclear war-fighting strategy.³⁷

The big lesson to be learned here is why a country such as the US, with all the vast intelligence resources it poured into the Soviet military target, could get it so badly wrong. In my view, the Americans concentrated too heavily on technical means of intelligence collection in the Cold War and not enough on accurately interpreting intelligence indicators and warnings based on human and other sources, both covert and public. This was undoubtedly due to the difficulty of penetrating the Soviet intelligence target.

Washington understood little about Soviet Politburo decision-making processes or of current Soviet leadership perceptions of the US. US intelligence agencies have long had a tendency to rely too much on technical methods of intelligence collection and not enough on understanding what motivates the potential adversary. To achieve this requires deep understanding of the history, geography, culture, personalities and politics of the target country.

There are lessons here for all intelligence agencies in the contemporary era, including Australia's. For example, North Korea's leadership is 'unpredictable' because we don't really understand it, and Iran's lack of understanding of the US is, at least in part, reciprocated by Washington.

Another lesson is that an understanding of the dynamics and the driving forces of the Cold War, and the exaggerated perceptions that the US and the USSR had of each other, might be applicable to the problems confronting us today. So, for example, the current competition and potential for dangerous stand-offs between China and the US requires us not to exaggerate China's military capabilities, and China and the US not to indulge in mirror-imaging of each other. There's already a tendency for this error to be evident in certain quarters in the US with the Pentagon's AirSea Battle doctrine, and in China with its development of anti-access/area-denial capabilities. China shouldn't be seen in the US as the default adversary, and Beijing shouldn't resort to Communist conspiracy theories about the inevitability of war with the capitalist West.

The danger, of course, is that in the event of tensions and conflict between China and the US there would be the potential for nuclear escalation, either by miscalculation or design. It's worrisome, in this context, that there are no nuclear arms control agreements, military confidence-building measures or the practising of emergency communications procedures between Washington and Beijing, unlike those that existed between Washington and Moscow in the Cold War, and which most of the time played a significant part in helping to avoid military conflict. If not handled carefully, there'll be a tendency for the same extreme stereotyping of each other that led to the sort of crises described in this paper. This isn't to say that China's military programs are benign or that Beijing isn't striving for political or military advantage. But it is to call for better understanding of China's national security policies, and the factors that constrain the rate of its economic and military growth, in a more detached way.

Notes

- 1 Robert M Gates, *From the shadows*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996, p. 276.
- 2 Gates, *From the shadows*, p. 258.
- 3 Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2011, p. 333.
- 4 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The military balance 1982–1983*, London, 1982, pp. 140–141.
- 5 IISS, *The military balance 1983–1984*, London 1983, p. 119.
- 6 Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, p. 197.
- 7 *Soviet capabilities for strategic nuclear conflict, 1982–92*, top secret National Intelligence Estimate NIE 11-3/8-82 15 February 1983, Director of Central Intelligence, CIA, Washington DC, p. 5.
- 8 John Newhouse, *War and peace in the Nuclear Age*, Alfred A Knopf, New York 1989, p. 328.
- 9 Pavel Podvig, *Russian strategic nuclear forces*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001, pp. 65–66. The 15A11 Perimeter system was never deployed in the configuration that allowed a fully automatic launch of the command rockets. The special command missiles were designed be launched at lofted trajectories over ICBM basing areas to transmit launch commands directly to Soviet command centres or individual surviving silos.
- 10 See Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, pp. 338–343.
- 11 Quoted in Leslie H Gelb, 'Who won the Cold War?', *New York Times*, 20 August 1992. Gelb held this conversation with Ogarkov just days after Reagan's SDI announcement, but didn't report it until 1992.
- 12 'Replies of Yuri V Andropov to questions from a *Pravda* correspondent', *Pravda*, 27 March 1983.
- 13 Benjamin B Fischer, *A Cold War conundrum*, Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 1997, p. 16, www.odci.gov/csi/monograph/cold-war/source.htm.
- 14 Declaration by Yuri V Andropov, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee and Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, 29 September 1983, p. 1. Publication of this declaration on the front page of both the leading Soviet newspapers underscored its importance and the leadership's full endorsement.
- 15 Cited in Gates, *From the shadows*, p. 267.
- 16 Gates, *From the shadows*, pp. 267–268.
- 17 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_Air_Lines_Flight_902.
- 18 Fischer, *A Cold War conundrum*, p. 8.
- 19 Fischer, *A Cold War conundrum*, pp. 6–7.
- 20 The Soviets regarded US aircraft carriers as an important nuclear reserve force that could play a significant role in determining the outcome of the final phases of hostilities. Destruction of the aircraft carriers was a critical element of Soviet war-fighting strategy (Director of Central Intelligence, *Soviet naval strategy and programs*, NIE 11-15/82D, March 1983, pp. 18–19).
- 21 Fischer, *A Cold War conundrum*, p. 19. See also the secret CIA document *The 1983 war scare in US–Soviet relations*, CIA Centre for the Study of Intelligence, 1996 (also by Fischer).
- 22 Gates, *From the shadows*, p. 271.
- 23 Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *Instructions from the Center: top-secret files on KGB foreign operations 1975–1985*, Stodder & Houghton, London, 1991, p. 81. Sergei Tarasenko, who at the time was a senior adviser to First Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kornienko, reports having seen a top secret KGB paper stating that the US had prepared everything for a first strike, that it might resort to a surgical strike against command centres in the USSR, and that it had the capability to incapacitate the leadership's command centre (William C Wohlforth (ed.), *Witnesses to the end of the Cold War*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1996, p. 71).
- 24 Quoted in Gates, *From the shadows*, p. 271.
- 25 See Fischer, *A Cold War conundrum*, p. 20, and Gates, *From the shadows*, p. 272.
- 26 Gates, *From the shadows*, p. 273.
- 27 Gates, *From the shadows*, p. 273. The advisory board's report was completed on 15 February 1990 and forwarded to President George HW Bush. It hasn't yet been declassified, but it apparently confirms that the Soviets took specific actions to sustain a surprise nuclear attack in view of reduced warning time. This included increased protection for their leadership, including improved bunkers and more survivable communications. By early 1984, there was an ominous list of military and other indicators available to the US intelligence community, which should have been a cause for concern. See the National Security Archive document 13 at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB428/.
- 28 *Implications of recent Soviet military–political activities*, top secret Special National Intelligence Estimate SNIE-11-10-84, Director of Central Intelligence, 18 May 1984, p. 3.
- 29 *Implications of recent Soviet military–political activities*, pp. iii, 1.
- 30 *Implications of recent Soviet military–political activities*, p. 1.
- 31 *Implications of recent Soviet military–political activities*, p. 1.
- 32 *Soviet policy toward the United States in 1984*, top secret Special National Intelligence Estimate SNIE 11-9-84, Director of Central Intelligence, no date (but circa August 1984), p. 3.
- 33 *Soviet policy toward the United States in 1984*, p. 11.
- 34 Don Oberdorfer, *The turn: from the Cold War to a new era*, Poseidon Press, New York, 1991, p. 67.

- 35 George F Kennan, *At a century's ending: reflections 1982–1995*, WW Norton, New York, 1996, p. 82.
- 36 For an overly optimistic view of the potential impact of a Soviet nuclear attack on Australia, see 'A preliminary appraisal of the effects on Australia of nuclear war', Office of National Assessments, 8 December 1980 (29 pages classified top secret AUSTEO), Australian National Archives, <http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp?B=7584267>, released 23 July 2012.
- 37 Discussion I had as Director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation in Washington in 1988 with the CIA's National Intelligence Officer for Warning and the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency about the risks of such a strike on Australia.

Primary sources

The most comprehensive primary sources for further reading, including the US National Intelligence Estimates cited in this paper, can be found at the National Security Archive, which is an independent non-government US research institute that collects and publishes declassified US Government files obtained via the Freedom of Information Act.

The following are the relevant websites that cover the period analysed in this paper:

- The 1983 war scare: 'The last paroxysm of the Cold War', Part I, posted 16 May 2013 at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB426/
- The 1983 war scare: 'The last paroxysm of the Cold War', Part II, posted 21 May 2013 at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB427/
- The 1983 war scare: 'The last paroxysm of the Cold War', Part III, posted 22 May 2013 at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB428/

These three websites contain 57 documents—many of them formerly classified secret or top secret—mainly from US intelligence sources, but with some documents from the Soviet Union.

About the author

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