

## Gorbachev's "sufficient defence"

Gerhard Wettig

**T**he concept of "military sufficiency" was coined during the Nixon Administration, which in this way gradually abandoned native ideas of "military superiority" and "military parity". At that time it was important to find a guiding principle for the SALT talks which would embody American public opinion as well as provide diplomatic flexibility vis à vis the USSR. With the concept of "military sufficiency", this double aim could be reached. The expression had no precise quantitative meaning, and thus enabled concessions to be made. Since then, public opinion has associated the concept of "military sufficiency" with a readiness to limit one's own military potential and thus satisfy the aspirations of the opposite side.

As Gorbachev adopted this principle on February 25, 1987, he awakened great hopes in the Western world. He spoke of the West's hostile position towards the USSR and described his country's reaction, declaring that "we have done, and will do in the future, all that is necessary to guarantee our security, and that of our friends and allies, so that no-one is tempted to test the strength of our borders. Nevertheless, we will not take any steps beyond the normal demands and requirements of reasonable, sufficient defence (*razumnaya, dostatochnaya oborona*)"<sup>1</sup>.

Gorbachev broached the subject once again during a meeting held on April 10, 1987 with the Czechoslovakian leaders, he pleaded for limitation above all of nuclear arms, but also of conventional ones, in the East and in the West, and declared his goal to be "to rule out the possibility of sudden attack". He conceded that some military "asymmetries" do exist, and should be eliminated by whichever side they appear in. He then added: "we are witnessing a process of gradual reduction in military confrontation in Europe; at each stage of this process, a level of reasonable sufficiency (*razumnaya dostatochnost*) should be kept"<sup>2</sup>.

The principle of "sufficiency" was also the subject of the joint declarations made by the party leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries in East Berlin on May 29, 1987. On that occasion, the Eastern leaders said they were in favour of "the adoption of disarmament measures", but stressed that they were "compelled to maintain their combat forces in permanent readiness and at a level sufficient to ward off any external attack on a member state of the Warsaw Pact". The military capacity of these allied countries was thus to be "strictly" kept "within the bounds of defensive sufficiency, in order to ward off any possible aggression"<sup>3</sup>.

### How much is enough?

The adoption of this concept of "sufficiency" by the Supreme Head of the Soviet Union, and later by other party leaders of the Socialist community, did not come as a surprise. By 1986, Anatoly Dobrynin, the Central Committee Secretary for Relations with the West, had already expressed similar views in an article in the party journal *Kommunist*. He had approached the "problem of reducing military potential and of limiting and destroying the means of warfare" as well as the "problem of mutual interdependence between offensive and defensive arms, as well as between nuclear and conventional ones". He then raised the question of where reasonable sufficiency came into the picture, in view of reductions in the levels of military potential<sup>4</sup>.

Immediately before Gorbachev adopted the concept of "sufficiency", S.F. Akhromeev, General Staff Chief, had publicly expressed his views on the matter. According to him, the existing equilibrium of military power, which he described as being balanced, had to be maintained "at the lowest possible level", and should be accompanied by "a reduction in military potential, down to the limits of sufficiency and defensive needs appropriate to a situation where nuclear arms are supposed to have already been completely eliminated"<sup>5</sup>.

How can "reasonable sufficiency" be interpreted in practice? The meaning currently attributed to this concept in the West, due to the concept's origin itself, does not necessarily correspond to the interpretation given by the Soviets. The literal meaning of the word "sufficiency" immediately leads to the question of how much is really sufficient, and this question remains unanswered. Indeed, any possible answer depends on a criterion to be previously established, i.e. which are the requirements that military power should fulfil in order to be sufficient. The Nixon Administration had a clear answer to this question: that the US strategic system should have sufficient

means to maintain a mutual nuclear deterrent against the possibility of war. But, in Gorbachev's case this criterion cannot be valid, since his policy is declaredly directed towards the abolition of nuclear deterrence<sup>6</sup>.

The broad-mindedness which President Nixon manifested with regard to minimal nuclear deterrence is thus not appropriate to the Soviet Secretary General, and the criteria which the latter has established in its place are to be inferred from the official comments made by his close collaborators.

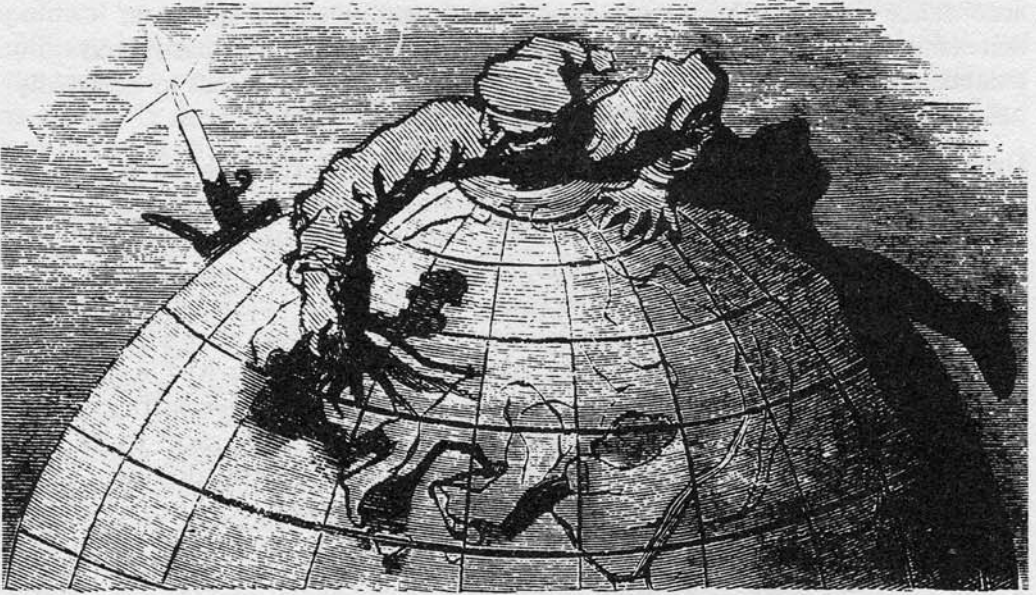
### **The answer of Gorbachev's Aides**

As declared by Primakov, current director of the "Institute for World Economy and International Relations" (IMEMO), and close collaborator to Gorbachev's influential adviser, N. A. Yakovlev, "the principle of reasonable sufficiency of military means" should satisfy the "prevention of total annihilation", and "serve as defence against any aggressor". Primakov then got down to aspects of economy and foreign policy, and said that the anticipated "rapid acceleration in the Soviet Union's economic and social development" needs an "optimized relationship between productive requirements and those indispensable for the reliable security of the country". At the same time, armament no longer represents "the practically only means of guaranteeing the country's safety", as was the case in the past. Today it is primarily "political means, that guarantee the country's security". Primakov maintains that the Soviet Union should only make as many military cut-backs as are justified by equivalent limitations in the NATO states<sup>7</sup>.

Army General Lushev, charged by Gorbachev with command of the Moscow, Volga and Urals military districts, and promoted to the post of First Representative of the Defence Minister, has explicitly said he agrees with the intentions of the party leadership and of the government "to keep military forces limited", since "their purpose is only to defend the country, and not to attack". He has also stated that there should be a "decrease in the level of Soviet armament, without, however, risking the weakening of one side only"<sup>8</sup>.

The interpretation of the Warsaw Pact declaration of May 29, 1987, has led Gorbachev's newly appointed Defence Minister, Army General Yazov, to say that the essential point of "the principle of defensive sufficiency" is that the nation should have "as much military force" as is necessary "for protection against external attack". In concrete terms, "the personnel deployed by the armed forces, and the quantity and quality of arms, strictly depend on the level of military threat, and on the nature and intensity of imperialist military preparations, and are determined by the security requirements of the Warsaw





Pact countries". The Defence Minister maintains that it is a question of security, i.e. defence, and that this requires "appropriate defensive potential".

### **Military sufficiency and the Balance of power**

Gorbachev's statement that "sufficient defence" has to be achieved through reduction in military force on both sides, has been generally repeated and partly carried out by the other leading Soviet officials. The catchword is: use of military parity to guarantee protection against war between East and West. The Soviets thus assume that the present relationship between respective military strength is to be considered equal, i.e. balanced, though here a nuance arises. Whereas the General Secretary meant that balance is to be considered as a whole, and can include particular advantages or disadvantages on both sides<sup>10</sup>, his General Chief of Staff maintains that there is no Soviet superiority in "any single aspect of armament"<sup>11</sup>. Apart from this small difference, however, Brezhnev's January 1977 statement that the present relationship between military forces is to be regarded as equal and balanced is still considered valid. As is clear from unilateral Soviet build up in the middle-range missile area from 1977 to 1983, the use of terms such as "parity" and "balance" would not seem to preclude the Kremlin from continuing to introduce unilateral increases in strength to Soviet advantage. This is in

accordance with the traditional Soviet way of dealing with a situation: increasing military potential, at the same time demanding that parity and balance should not be destroyed, and proclaiming that the threat to declaredly balanced, existing military relations can only come from the West.

Under the influence of Gorbachev's "reasonable sufficiency", decisive importance is also being given to the "correlation between the levels of Socialist and Capitalist military potential" (sootnoshenie urovnei voennykh potentsialov i kapitalizma)<sup>12</sup>. With the justification, that, as long as there are nuclear weapons, "strategic parity between the USA and USSR" maintains "a stabilizing influence despite its disadvantages", the only real possibility of sufficiency is considered to be a "reduction" in the level of parity "in this period"<sup>7, 3</sup>. As Primakov has noted, this "emphasis on defensive sufficiency" has not reduced "the acute need to weaken and stop the arms race" by "a single jot"<sup>7</sup>. Seen in this light, "sufficiency" has simply the function of strengthening the security gained whilst discussing "parity".

### **A non-offensive military doctrine**

The Soviets are using the principle of "sufficiency" for solely defensive purposes, on all occasions, and this version is emphasized as being official military doctrine. "Our party and our government believe that military power must be kept within those limits that are necessary for defence, but not for attack"<sup>8</sup>. The Soviets also mention "the defensive character of the military strategy of Socialism"<sup>9</sup>.

Now, this all sounds as though Warsaw Pact armed forces are going to limit themselves in the future to strategically defensive operations only. But this is contradicted by the fact that the structure of the military power of the Eastern bloc in the recent past (which was indisputably offensive), is still being depicted as the most recent realization of this defence principle<sup>9</sup>, and by the fact that one still find, in official communications involving the concept of "sufficient defence", the traditional comparisons of strategic offensive with military agility, and of strategic defensive with static warfare<sup>11</sup>. From the Soviet point of view, the requirement that "neither of the sides should possess offensive forces or means to ensure its defence" is not contrary to the requirement that in case of war, the enemy is to be repelled "with the greatest of determination"<sup>9, 11</sup>. In Soviet terminology, this means that military operations must be offensive to the point of completely destroying the enemy.

According to Soviet explanations, there is a strong inter-relation between

political regime and military aggressiveness. It is therefore to the “defensive military and political purposes”<sup>8</sup>, and “peace-loving policies”<sup>9</sup> of the USSR that the trend of official military doctrine, and of its application merely to defence, is ostensibly due. Whatever Eastern combat forces do, in the case of war, “is not intended as an attack on anyone, but simply as defence against possible aggression, and as protection of the nation and its allies”<sup>11</sup>. Since the Soviets assume that the “aggressive nature of imperialist policies will not be softened”, it can be taken for granted that all preparations for war, or actions of war, as carried out by their side, are “prevention of (Western) aggression” and are only “kinds of armed struggle to protect the Socialist Fatherland”. “Soviet military science and art” are thus to be evaluated and judged on this basis<sup>13</sup>.

The Defence Minister, Yazov, has summarized the official position in a few sentences. “The defensive military doctrine of the Warsaw Pact, is exclusively intended to protect us against any military threat, but this does not mean that our operations will have a passive nature. They will be based on the unshakeable foundation of Lenin’s teachings on the protection of the Socialist Fatherland. In case of aggression, our armed forces, together with our brother armies, will protect our Socialist achievements with the greatest of determination. The security of our country and of the entire Socialist community is a sacred matter to us”<sup>9</sup>. And one of the Minister’s First Representatives has added that it is necessary to “dispose of all the forms and means of warfare which the adversary is capable of bringing into use”<sup>8</sup>.

These easily available declarations, in part directly connected to Gorbachev’s “New Thinking”<sup>9,12</sup>, repeat the traditional point of view of the Brezhnev period, that the Soviets prefer widespread offensive operations on the battlefield, a preference which is thoroughly typical characteristic of Socialist military thinking. In the face of these, defensive operations seem to be mere emergency expedients, justifiable in moments of weakness or under special constraint.

This “active” nature can thus be made to co-exist with the defensive character of official military thinking, because these operations are attributed to the technical-military part of the strategic doctrine. According to the official thesis, this is to be perceived as a kind of purely technical rule of application, which has nothing to do with the political nature of Soviet military theory.

The only real interpretation, then, can come from its political basis, which establishes once and for all, that the USSR, as a Socialist state, is peace-loving, and will only reach for its weapons as protection against aggression. It thus follows, that the Soviets will always define the defensive nature of their actions as a “counterbalance against aggressive, imperialist policies”<sup>14</sup>.



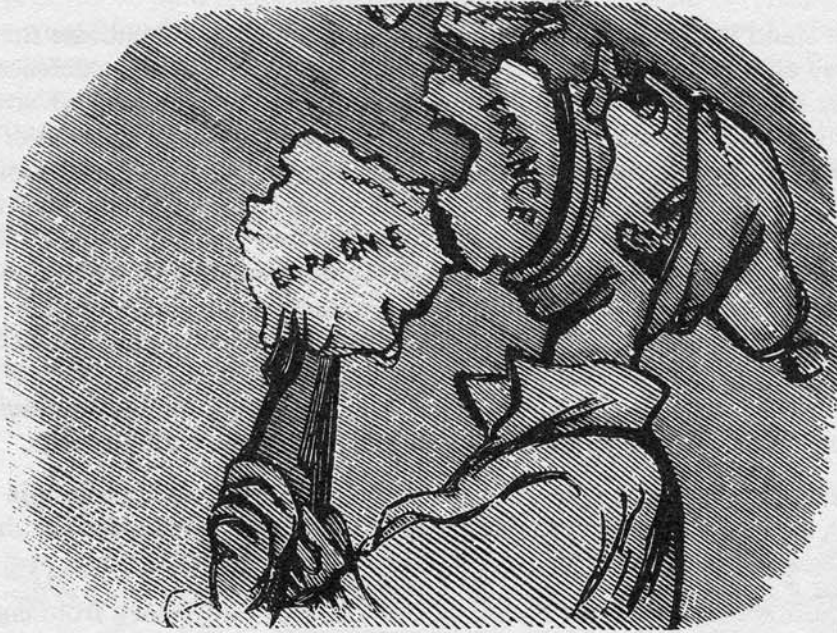
### **“Annihilating” the aggressor**

Various declarations from the Gorbachev period illustrate the meaning of the defensive character of Soviet military doctrine, in that they maintain that the USSR and its allies:

- “will never, in any circumstances, even begin military action against any state or group of allied states, unless they are the object of an armed attack”;
- “will never be the first to use a nuclear weapon”;
- “will not have any territorial claims on any European or non-European country”;
- “will never behave as an enemy to any State or people”, but “will be prepared to enter into relations with all nations in the world, without exception, on the basis of reciprocal consideration for security interests and peaceful co-existence”<sup>3,9</sup>.

According to official declarations, then, the armed forces of the USSR and those of its allies are supposed to fulfil a two-fold purpose: avoid war between East and West, but also offer protection against the adversary in the event such a conflict should break out (which, in the official thinking would inevitably be at the initiative of the West). The Warsaw Pact has the task to ensure “sufficient military readiness for battle, in order to avoid being taken by surprise”, and in case of war, to deal the aggressor “an annihilating response”<sup>3,9,7</sup>. Protection against “being taken by surprise” means ruling out the possibility of a Western adversary planning and carrying out a surprise attack, and Soviet authors discuss this at length. However, this possibility, which should be excluded, is often taken into consideration, as when the Soviets declare, for example, that there must be no chance of “surprise provocation”<sup>8</sup>.

The indication that a potential battle adversary (branded as the aggressor under all circumstances), must be dealt an “annihilating response”, is the crucial element in Soviet declarations. This formula on one side means that war with the West implies the destruction of the adversary, and on the other side sets the criteria on which the type and extent of Eastern armed forces are to be based. As long as the Western states possess the option of employing nuclear arms, “the essence of sufficiency in Soviet nuclear strategy is dictated by the need to allow no nuclear attack, even under the most unfavourable circumstances, to go unpunished”. The punishment intended for such an action is the infliction of “unacceptable damage” on the aggressor. “Sufficiency of conventional means entails the quantity and quality of armed forces and weapons appropriate to guarantee the reliable collective defence of the Socialist Community. The limits of sufficiency are determined by the actions of the USA and NATO, and not by us”<sup>9</sup>.



How far the Soviets would go to satisfy these aims in case of war, may be seen in a declaration by the Defence Minister Yazov, on the threat which the USA poses to the USSR. The subject was the number of possible American “enemy actions”: massive armament, the stationing of US troops in proximity to Warsaw Pact territory, and the “mad illusion that the social systems of the Socialist countries could be dismantled”. The Defence Minister saw danger for the vital interests of the Soviet Union not only in the presence of American soldiers on the European theatre, but even in the very existence of Western society, which is itself considered a threat to the Soviet system. In the case of war, with the conditions for “peaceful co-existence” no longer valid, then Yazov’s declaration would mean that all this would have to be cleared up. And as an army general he had no doubts as to how the Soviet armed forces would accomplish this task: “I can be quite open. We would advise no-one to put our strength to the test. Our answer to provocation is the increasing defensive power of the Warsaw Pact States, and the sharpening of the vigilance and military readiness of our armed forces”<sup>9</sup>.



### **“Sufficient” and “reliable” defence**

This firm stand in grand-strategic thinking certainly does not indicate that Gorbachev and his collaborators are likely to interpret “sufficient defence” as a reason for reducing their military strength. A distinguishing aspect of Soviet official statements can be found in the formula that “in order to ward off an aggression, one has to increase - and not to decrease - one’s military potential, up to the point of sufficiency”, and has thus not been reduced at all<sup>12</sup>. And this is also expressed in official statements on “sufficiency”, which energetically emphasize the need for the Socialist nations to maintain a very high state of military readiness, and to be continually strengthening it. Their constant repetition of the requirement that the defence, i.e. the security of the USSR and its allies must be “reliably” (nadezno) guaranteed, is clearly a sign of their massive military capacity. This concept of “reliability” shows that protection of the Soviet Union, in case of an East-West war, would be without limit.

For some time now, the Soviet concepts of “reliable defence” (nadeznaja oborona), and occasionally “reliable security” (nadeznaja bezopasnost), have clearly stressed some relevant ideas on their military requirements:

— the USSR must possess the means of preventing an adversary from entering its own, or allied territories, and to be able from the beginning of a conflict to penetrate deep into the adversary’s territory;

— in the course of military operations, the USSR must be in a position to put an end to the “attack of any aggressor” by annihilation of the adversary.

The USSR thus intends its military operations to “possess an agile and dynamic character, and to achieve complete victory over an adversary”. It must consequently “not only be able to protect itself, opposing the aggressor with means and forms of passive defence, but it must also be able to offer an annihilating military counterattack, and destroy the aggressor completely under any conditions whatsoever”<sup>15</sup>. Soviet glosses of Gorbachev’s concept of “sufficient defence” thus fit into a traditional setting.

### **“Deterrence” in Soviet thinking**

For a long time, relevant Soviet declarations have been illustrating the point according to which, in case of an East-West nuclear confrontation, their aim of providing “reliable defence” would prove quite illusory. Thus, in case of a conflict in Europe, and as long as the USA keeps the option of striking with nuclear arms, above all against Soviet territory, the danger of extensive

destruction would persist for the USSR and for its more westward allies. And if the price to be paid came to this, a military victory in the the European war theatre would hardly remain interesting to the Soviet leadership. Under these circumstances, the Kremlin has been considering, since the times of Brezhnev, of outright rejecting the concept of nuclear deterrence, and has been directing its military preparations in a way that assumes as realistic the possibility of a limitation of war means only to conventional ones. This marked tendency has been reinforced under Gorbachev. Since the XXVII CPSU Congress, the Soviet leaders have been using the idea of "the creation of a nuclear-free world" in their diplomacy and propaganda, their aim being to eliminate or reduce Western nuclear options. And as the Kremlin assumes that the Americans have no interest in engaging in a global strategic missile exchange with the USSR, they have concentrated their attention on the elimination of American capacity for selective nuclear strike.



This latter capacity is the foundation of Western deterrence, and is intended to remind the Soviets how any war in Europe would be loaded with risks for the USSR. However it is precisely these risks, which, in their role as a mutual deterrent to any outbreak of war from a Western point of view, contrast with Soviet requirements for unlimited security during peace or war. The general Soviet attitude is also expressed in Gorbachev's statements on "sufficient defence". NATO "measures for [nuclear] deterrence", and the "balance of terror" which depends on this, are judged to be "not only amoral, but unreliable as well"<sup>7,8</sup>. To obtain "genuinely balanced security", Gorbachev proposes "not a high, but a low upper arms limit in the strategic arms equilibrium", from which "nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction can be completely eliminated"<sup>12</sup>. The essential point here is "genuinely balanced security", which would concretely give the USSR unilateral military advantages, in that a conventional war in Europe could be tolerated, and won, by the USSR, but not by the Western countries.

Soviet efforts to escape from the concept of nuclear deterrence do not mean, however, that they are not interested in deterrence from war in general. But this should be established by conventional means. Sufficient military capacity for protection against an adversary in case of war, automatically makes war unattractive to the aggressor "readiness to repel an aggressor is the most effective means of deterrence", the two possessing a "reciprocal, dialectical relationship"<sup>7</sup>. Accordingly, the Soviet armed forces, prepared for "active and decisive" operations in the "carrying out of military actions to destroy an aggressor", are to be considered "one of the chief factors in the prevention (Sderzivanie) of the aggressive efforts of reactionary imperialist circles, and a guarantee for international security"<sup>11</sup>.

Connected to this is the thesis that the security of all nations and peoples depends on the fact that the Soviet Union is strong enough to restrain the warmongering forces of "Imperialism". On this basis, the Soviet Union claims to be acting in the interests of "general security" (vseobscaja bezopasnost). The assumption behind this is that the other nations can only satisfy their interest in avoiding war, by accepting the help of, and not opposing, the USSR. Deterrence, as hoped for by the Kremlin, depends on Soviet capacity to unilaterally threaten other nations and peoples with conventional forces, without the latter being able to offer any real counter-threat.

### **Security by political means**

According to the "new philosophy of foreign policy", "new concepts in the approach to the problem of security" have been declared indispensable. In particular, "political measures" have been placed "in the foreground"<sup>7</sup>. Western public opinion has had the impression that this implies Soviet rejection of the installation and maintenance of military potential, yet this interpretation is untenable in the light of the declarations analyzed above. What, then, is the alternative meaning of this?

The respective Soviet points of view are that, after the hypothetical elimination of nuclear arms, "the stability of the world" would be maintained above all "by means of political and legal means"; that individual disarmament agreements are to be made<sup>7</sup>, and that it is even possible to talk of an "all-embracing system of international security"<sup>7,11</sup>. The creation of this latter kind of system would be most important in Europe, where the Soviets would like to dismantle NATO and thus extend their hegemony to the Atlantic.



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At the same time, official statements from Moscow make it clear that the Soviet leaders intend to keep their armed forces on a level corresponding to what is "sufficient" for the achievement of their aims. In spite of the fact that they say there should be "no reliable alternative to political measures in the field of security", it is explicit for them that the "military component" will continue to keep "its meaning with regard to guaranteeing the security of both conflicting sides", even in the case of "certain future changes". Another statement would seem to mean that the heralded "rupture in the hundreds-of-years-old ways of thinking and acting on the international scene" really refers to something else. "Today, security cannot be guaranteed through mere improvement of the sword and shield". And then the Soviets reflect how important it is to finally proceed to action in the field disarmament diplomacy<sup>11</sup>.

Now the meaning of all this has only one sense: that changes in military power relations such as those which Gorbachev would like to bring about, (for example, through treaties eliminating American deterrent options involving nuclear arms), really would determine the security situation from a political standpoint. But it would not be politics, as such, which would determine the new relations; it would rather be the case of military factors being changed from a political point of view.

### **New ways, old aims**

The picture emerging, then, from the relevant statements of Gorbachev's collaborators and by representatives of the "new thinking", illustrates a kind of military "sufficiency" different from the one to which Western public opinion is accustomed. The two traditional elements of Soviet defence policy dominate: a grand-strategic doctrine based on black-and-white evaluation of the world scene, and an idea of wartime security based on the capacity of totally annihilating the adversary. The Soviets have only changed the ways of

achieving their older aims, and the older names they had for them. But only very few nuances which might lead to an hope for improvement of their old political notions and objectives, have been introduced in their approach.

A quite remarkable phenomenon is the consistency which characterizes the official statements of the different top leaders, in both military and political positions of responsibility. Since the discussion on "sufficient defence" obviously is a part of the struggle to assert Gorbachev's "new thinking", we could be easily led to assume that the whole of the ruling élite shares without any essential nuance or difference in meaning these two ideas (the grand-strategic doctrine, and the idea of totally annihilating the adversary), *per se* and in their rationale. However, as it appears clearly from the example of the disagreements, among the theoreticians of the "new thinking"<sup>11</sup>, on the role of class standpoints, this apparent unanimity does not exclude the possibility that the introduction of new political terms has led to disagreement outside the Party circles that surround most closely the General Secretary.

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14. D. F. Ustinov, "Bessmertnyj podvig", in *Pravda*, May 9, 1987.
15. N. V. Ogarkov, "Istorija ucit bditel'nosti", Voenizdat, Moscow 1985, p. 76 f. Since the fall of 1984 Marshal Ogarkov has been commander-in-chief of the crucial Strategic Operations Section (TVD) - West, established in the event of a European conflict.
16. Compare Gerhard Wettig's, "Gorbachev and his "new openness" (glasnost) in Soviet Foreign Policy", in *Aussenpolitik*, February 1987.