



Kennan vs Nitze: “To Discover How Much of Our Resources Must Be Mobilized for War”

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The process of net assessment is generally regarded as a recent invention of American strategists – an attempt to move past the error of evaluating only one belligerent’s strategy and instead make a holistic analysis of both side’s capabilities and intent in a conflict. While the idea of net assessment as “new” has validity, Carl von Clausewitz provided a means of net assessment that remains applicable:

To discover how much of our resources must be mobilized for war, we must first examine our political aim and that of the enemy. We must gauge the strength and situation of the opposite state. We must gauge the character and abilities of its government and people and do the same in regard to our own. Finally, we must evaluate the political sympathies of other states and the effect the war may have on them.

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The Cold War was defined by its lack of direct military action between the protagonists while simultaneously teetering perilously close to von Clausewitz's concept of ideal war. What if Clausewitz's ideas on assessment were used to analyze the seminal documents that framed the Cold War? "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" (1947) and NSC-68 (1950s) provided important and superficially comparable insights of the United States' and Soviet Union's political aims, strength and situation, their character and abilities, and to some degree the sympathies of other states. George Kennan, writing as 'X,' believed that the Soviet Union was relentless but patient in its goals, while also susceptible to manipulation using calm, rational, and non-military means. In NSC-68, Paul Nitze saw the Soviets quite differently. Nitze's blunt language regarding the Soviet's intentions is emotional, power based, and martial. His conclusions and recommendations follow suit. The significant differences in their evaluation of each government's political aims, their advocacy for opposing solutions, and most importantly the message of their rhetoric provide stark contrasts. Despite these differences, both proved to be enduring keystones for determining how leaders use the instruments of national power as American strategists continue "to discover how much of our resources must be mobilized for war."

We must first examine our political aim and that of the enemy.

Both documents clearly recognize the Soviet threat and the necessity for the United States to resist that threat in a decisive and deliberate manner. Differing interpretations of the nature of the threat and the challenge posed by the Soviet Union led to significantly different recommendations.

Kennan's approach drew from a historical and psychological basis of Russian, Soviet, and Communist thought. His view of Soviet political aims recognized three concepts: the innate antagonism between capitalism and Socialism, the infallibility of the Kremlin, and "that the [Kremlin] leadership is at liberty to put forward for tactical purposes any particular thesis which it finds useful to the cause at any particular moment and to require the faithful and unquestioning acceptance of that thesis by the members of the movement as a whole." (X-859) Kennan clearly expected the Kremlin to tell the Soviet people, and the world community, anything necessary to further the eventual defeat of capitalism. Kennan also defines the potential of both as a limited and gradual US goal of "mellowing" and an unlimited goal of "break[ing]-up" of the Soviet regime. (X-868) Most important, Kennan did not see these goals as irreconcilable. Kennan did not see the overall conflict in the terms of a "zero-sum game."

Nitze took a different approach. He saw the goals of the Soviets, and Communism in general, as seeking "to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world" (NSC68-I). He further characterized Soviet leaders as desiring the "ultimate elimination of any effective opposition to their authority" (NSC68-III). For Nitze, the Soviet goals are in marked contrast to the goals of the United States: "to assure the integrity and vitality of our free society...Our determination to maintain the essential elements of individual freedom...create conditions under which our free and democratic system can live and prosper; and our determination to fight if necessary to defend our way of life" (NSC68-II). Nitze sees the conflict as one of "power" versus "freedom." While Nitze does not state an unlimited goal for the United States, when contrasted against the Soviet goal, the US political aim must be unlimited, for Nitze cannot see an accommodation of US goals by the Soviets. For Nitze the conflict was one of irreconcilable ultimate political aims—a zero-sum game.

Where Kennan speaks to an inexorable and innate antagonism between Capitalism and Socialism, Nitze focuses on "absolute power." The use of the words "impose" and "ultimate elimination" make a striking contrast to Kennan's use of "inevitability" and "eventual." Kennan pushes against immediacy writing that the Russians should not be "considered as embarked upon a do-or-die

program to overthrow our society by a given date” (X-859) while Nitze paints an urgent conflict between slavery and freedom, writing of an ongoing “assault on free institutions” and sees the United States’ “free society . . . mortally challenged by the Soviet system” (NSC68-IV). Thus, the different analytical conclusions of political aims led to radically different conclusions and recommendations in the ensuing sections of net assessment.

We must gauge the strength and situation of the opposite state.

In gauging the strength and situation of the opposing powers, Kennan is clear when evaluating the American position alongside that of the Soviet, writing that it is unlikely that “American behavior unassisted and alone could . . . bring about the early fall of Soviet power in Russia” (X-868). Kennan writes of Russia’s “precariously spotty and uneven” economic development and goes so far as to call Russia “an impotent nation . . . unable to back up [the export of enthusiasm and primitive political vitality] by the real evidences of material power and prosperity” (X-864). The greatest uncertainty in the Soviet Union, Kennan determines, is the uncertainty of power succession. His observation that “If, consequently, anything were ever to occur to disrupt the unity and efficacy of the Party as a political instrument, Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies” is profoundly prophetic (X-868).

Again, Nitze takes a stronger and more martial approach by outlining Soviet strengths in military and geographic terms. “First, the Soviet Union is widening the gap between its preparedness for war and the unpreparedness of the free world for war”— the Soviet Union is militarily stronger, willing to wage war, and increasing its capacity for both. “[The] Communist success in China, taken with the politico-economic situation in the rest of South and South-East Asia, provides a springboard for a further incursion in this troubled area” and “the Soviet Union holds positions in Europe which, if it maneuvers skillfully, could be used to do great damage to the Western European economy” stokes fears of specific aggression that the West is unprepared for. Finally, “the Soviet Union has accelerated its efforts to integrate satellite economy [sic] with its own and to increase the degree of autarchy within the areas under its control.” Each of these assessments is in keeping with Nitze’s belief that the political aims of the Soviets are “to retain and solidify their absolute power, first in the Soviet Union and second in the areas now under their control” (NSC68-III).

We must gauge the character and abilities of its government and people and do the same in regard to our own.

Each analyst provided a far more thorough assessment of the character and abilities of the Soviets than of the United States. Kennan describes Soviet character and behavior with the idea that “its main concern is to make sure that it has filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power” (X-861). Again, different in tone from Nitze, Kennan sees the Soviet character as eminently flexible and patient: “if it finds unassailable barriers in its path, it accepts these philosophically and accommodates itself to them” (X-861). Yet, even in the face of those barriers, Kennan sees the Soviets as unceasingly providing constant pressure towards their desired aims and that they do so without any belief that the goal must be reached by a specific point in time. Kennan’s only comments on American character lie in the admonition that the United States must live up to its own founding ideals in dealing with the Soviet Union—those same ideals that Nitze found to be antithetical to Soviet political aims.

Nitze looks at the West and paints a portrait of decline and in doing so paints a portrait of Soviet

ascendency. He writes clearly that American assistance provided record production in Western Europe, but that domestic budgetary pressure and waning political interest will soon force a reduction to that assistance. He further predicts an overall “decline in economic activity of serious proportions unless more positive governmental programs are developed than are now available” (NSC68-VI). Nitze sees the Soviet character as satisfying a “compulsion which demands total power over all men within the Soviet state without a single exception” (NSC68-IV).

Finally, we must evaluate the political sympathies of other states and the effect the war may have on them.

Exiting global war and entering a short period in which the United States was the only viable global power neither Kennan nor Nitze paid much attention to the sympathies of other states. They saw the United States as *the* world leader and by default the rest of the world as followers. This view does not mean they ignored the rest of the world. Nitze recognized that economic instability and the pressure of Soviet expansion would affect the countries of Western Europe and South East Asia, and in turn, affect the political aims of the opposing powers. Nitze, as usual, is stark in his evaluation: “Throughout Asia the stability of the present moderate governments, which are more in sympathy with our purposes than any probable successor regimes would be, is doubtful” (NSC68-VI). Kennan’s description was also characteristic, recognizing that the “degree to which the United States can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time” (X-867). Again, patient, truthful, honest deeds held forward as the path to achieving US political aims.

Contrasts and Recommendations.

Kennan biographer John Lewis Gaddis believes that George Kennan did not read Clausewitz (Gaddis NWC Evening Lecture Oct 3, 2011). Nitze certainly did, but it is unknown whether he did so prior to writing NSC68. Yet both had innate analytical skills that were able to answer the majority of Clausewitz’s questions for net assessment. While they both agreed that the Western world should stand against Soviet expansion, where they most clearly split was in their recommendations and tone.

Kennan saw the United States as a diplomatic and economic powerhouse believing that American action in the world, calm and rational action, would drive the Kremlin towards moderation: “It is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” And “It is important to note, however, that such a policy has nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward “toughness” (X-861).

Where Kennan saw real hope was in the future generation of Soviets. “The younger generation,” he wrote, “despite all vicissitudes and sufferings, is numerous and vigorous; and the Russians are a talented people. But it still remains to be seen what will be the effects on mature performance of the abnormal emotional strains of childhood which Soviet dictatorship created and which were enormously increased by the war. Such things as normal security and placidity of home environment have practically ceased to exist in the Soviet Union outside of the most remote farms and villages. And observers are not yet sure whether that is not going to leave its mark on the overall capacity of the generation now coming into maturity” (X-864).

Despite the hopefulness, Kennan was not blinded to the realities of Soviet designs and recognized that the U.S. “cannot expect in the foreseeable future to enjoy political intimacy with the Soviet regime. It must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena. It must continue to expect that Soviet policies will reflect no abstract love of peace and stability, no real faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the Socialist and capitalist worlds, but rather a cautious, persistent pressure toward the disruption and, weakening of all rival influence and rival power” (X-867).

In the final analysis, Kennan called for the United States to act upon her founding ideals: “Thus the decision will really fall in large measure in this country itself. The issue of Soviet-American relations is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation”(X-868).

Where Kennan focused on diplomacy and economics, Nitze focused on military might and intelligence. Nitze proposed four distinct courses of action: “ a. Continuation of current policies, with current and currently projected programs for carrying out these policies; b. Isolation; c. War; and d. A more rapid building up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world than provided under a, with the purpose of reaching, if possible, a tolerable state of order among nations without war and of preparing to defend ourselves in the event that the free world is attacked”(NSC68-IX). Each course of action was delineated in terms of military, political, economic, and social aspects, as well as negotiation, with the first and last courses of action being the most detailed.

While avoiding the blatant use of a “throw away COA,” Nitze clearly recommends “d”—the rapid buildup of political, economic, and military strength. His final recommendations to “encourage and promote the gradual retraction of undue Russian power and influence” required that the United States “develop a level of military readiness which can be maintained as long as necessary,” “maximize [her] economic potential,” “strengthen the orientation toward the United States of the non-Soviet nations,” and “place the maximum strain on the Soviet structure of power . . . particularly . . . the relationships between Moscow and the satellite countries.” He concluded with “In summary, we must, by means of a rapid and sustained build-up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world, and by means of an affirmative program intended to wrest the initiative from the Soviet Union, confront it with convincing evidence of the determination and ability of the free world to frustrate the Kremlin design of a world dominated by its will.” Yet, even as he recommended against war in many passages of the document, he sees that war is a likely eventuality: “[it] is the only means short of war which eventually may force the Kremlin to abandon its present course of action and to negotiate acceptable agreements on issues of major importance”(NSC68-Conclusion).

The most striking difference between Kennan and Nitze is found in the language used and feelings generated by the different documents. Each was writing to influence a certain target: Nitze writing directly for the President and Kennan for the American people (and by extension the government and president). Each sought to sway specific elements of the Clausewitzian Triangle (people, army, government) by impacting the relative strength of the Clausewitzian Trinity.

Nitze took the more bellicose approach towards stirring passion. His document leaves a sense of urgency, threat, an intimation of dark and dire consequences if the United States does not act immediately, and decisively. Kennan is more thoughtful, patient, urging calm and protracted deliberation and deliberate action. Kennan is seeking to cool passions and subordinate passion to

rational policy where Nitze is stoking the fires of action.

If one were to take Clausewitz's "war by algebra" concept and apply it to these two documents, the emotional feeling is supported by the raw language. Nitze uses the word "war" 139 times. Kennan only 8. Nitze uses "military" 120 times, Kennan once. While Kennan does not refrain from negative word usage, he uses some form of the word "diplomacy" twice as often as Nitze. Where Kennan emphasizes patience, Nitze does not use any form of the word, relying instead on "rapid" (23 times) and "threat" (22 times).

Impact on the future.

Were one keeping score, Kennan might easily be declared victor in the battle of the assessments. Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev were members of the generation he placed his hopes with. The economic pressure brought to bear by the United States in the 1980s forced an environment in which the Communist Party lost "unity and efficacy . . . as a political instrument" and the Soviet Union, almost overnight, turned from a monolithic power to a challenged country whose major claim to strength was an aging inventory of nuclear weapons.

However, it can also be argued that Nitze had a greater impact on the composition and use of the instruments of national power. His detailed treatise included statements that transformed our pre-war isolationist country into the military-industrial complex it is today: "Any increase in military power in peacetime, however, should be related both to its probable military role in war, to the implementation of immediate and long-term United States foreign policy vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, and to the realities of the existing situation" (NSC68-VI). This new triumvirate—military role in war, applicability to the current adversary, and realities of existing situation—has remained a cornerstone of modern force structure analysis.

Conclusion.

Within Clausewitz's discussion of assessment, he closes with a telling paragraph.

To assess these things in all their ramifications and diversity is plainly a colossal task. Rapid and correct appraisal of them clearly calls for the intuition of a genius; to master this complex mass by sheer methodological examination is obviously impossible. ...The size and variety of factors to be weighed, and the uncertainty about the proper scale to use are bound to make it far more difficult to reach the right conclusion.

Whether Kennan or Nitze "got it right" should be far less of a concern than the well-deserved recognition that they at least tried—and did exceptionally well—at what Clausewitz said required the "intuition of a genius." If they went wrong in any place it was their desire to sway a course of action, rather than to present the stark and unembellished positive and negative consequences of each action.