

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Subject: Zbigniew Brzezinski
Position: Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 1977-1980
Date/Time: November 20, 1991, 2:00 p.m.
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Interviewer: John G. Hines
Prepared: Based on notes

In Brzezinski's personal opinion, the Soviets were not preparing to initiate war but they were planning to win if war broke out. They wanted to acquire a demonstrable war-winning capability that they could exploit politically. Serious Soviet strategists realized that a clear-cut first strike capability was unattainable, but if the USSR acquired a theoretical first strike capability, this would have political consequences.

The Soviets believed in nuclear deterrence and practiced it from the late 1950s to offset what they perceived to be significant U.S. advantages in strategic forces. The Soviets did not believe in MAD in the sense of accepting the logic of mutual deterrence based on fear as a substitute for developing a credible warfighting capability for their strategic forces. In the 1970s, while they developed their own warfighting capabilities, they pretended to accept MAD in order to put a cap on or not stimulate U.S. efforts to gain a warfighting capability. The Soviets considered their warfighting capability to be a projection of deterrence, which would work better if the United States continued to abide by MAD (that is to say, if the U.S. continued to rely heavily on MAD logic to avoid developing a truly credible warfighting ability that could be brought to bear if deterrence should fail). Brzezinski saw absolutely no contradiction between the Soviet commitment to a warfighting capability and the Soviet belief in nuclear deterrence.

Dr. Brzezinski noted that some in the U.S. National Security community interpreted the Soviet preference for warfighting to mean that the Soviets preferred and were eager to fight wars rather than to deter them. Most, including himself, saw Soviet seriousness about warfighting as a different approach to planning against the event of the failure of deterrence, not as an alternative to deterrence. A benefit implicit in this approach was that a credible warfighting capability could enhance deterrence to the advantage of the Soviet side.

Parity was incompatible with Soviet warfighting capabilities. The Soviets did not accept parity because they regarded the nuclear relationship as dynamic. At any given time, one of the two sides was either ahead or moving ahead. Soviet weapons development was influenced by U.S. weapons programs.

Brzezinski asserted that PD-59 was designed to give the U.S. a warfighting capability. PD-59, combined with the Pershing II, MX missile, and SDI programs, showed that the U.S. government professed adherence to MAD but was in fact moving toward a warfighting capability and was more likely to prevail over the competition.

The Soviets saw nuclear weaponry as having military utility. They concentrated more systematically than the American side on the military utility of nuclear arms, particularly for theater use.

The Soviets were not risk takers, so they sought to win through intimidation rather than warfighting. They sought superiority at different rungs of the escalation ladder in order to inhibit the U.S. from escalating and thereby to gain a strategic advantage. The Soviets preferred to fight only with conventional forces. If they were winning, they would not employ nuclear weapons. Brzezinski believed that the United States should be willing to go nuclear against a successful conventional attack by the Warsaw Pact. His view was not widely shared but gained greater acceptance during the course of the Carter Administration.

In his gut, Brzezinski felt that the Soviets would not use nuclear weapons first and might be restrained even if they had superiority in nuclear weapons. If we employed nuclear arms, the Soviets probably would match us or maybe escalate. They would respond to U.S. tactical nuclear use with tactical preemption, in the context of on-going hostilities. Brzezinski doubted that during a theater war, the USSR would strike preemptively at U.S. strategic forces in the continental U.S.

The Soviets probably did not believe in limited nuclear options (LNO) but they may have wanted a capacity to employ LNO, especially if it enhanced the credibility of their threat to the West.

The Soviets had significant chemical weapons (CW) capabilities and they used CW in exercises. In a serious war, they would probably resort to CW, and they might even employ CW in the absence of nuclear use.

Brzezinski received much helpful data (e.g., on the USSR's strategic buildup) but little helpful interpretation. The data were ambiguous and the same data were cited to support contradictory positions and interpretations. For instance, there was no systematic assessment of Soviet warfighting capabilities. Analysts argued more about interpretation than evidence, though the data concerning Soviet ABM systems and possible breakthroughs in Soviet military technology were in fact ambiguous. Brzezinski considered it important to consult good Soviet analysts and he solicited the views of CIA, INR,¹⁰ DoD, and outside experts.

¹⁰ Refers to the Intelligence and Research Division of the U.S. State Department.