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Russia's choice: Guns or glasnost

It's fascinating to watch Mikhail Gorbachev kick lazy old Russia in the seat of its collective pants. Lots of Russians who have been used to a seedy but stress-free life are now in a tizzy or a grump.

Opposition to Gorbachev's dramatic program of openness and restructuring—glasnost and perestroika—is growing and plain to see. To date, resistance has come from the bureaucracy, party apparatus and from legions of die-hard Stalinists and featherbedders. Yet so far we have heard almost nothing from that other key component of Soviet power structure, the military. Here, too, trouble is brewing.

Gorbachev keeps repeating that the USSR spends too much on defence. Funds needed to revitalize Soviet industry and provide consumer goods must come out of the military budget. And what a budget it is!

Until recently, Soviet defence spending was estimated by the CIA at 12-15% of gross national product and by the more hawkish DIA at 16-18% of GNP. Now, based on revelations by Soviet officials, it has become apparent that the USSR is spending at least 20% of GNP—and perhaps as much as 25%—on the military.

This is a staggering figure. The U.S., by contrast, spends a mere 7% of GNP on defence and Canada a tiny 2%. Worse, the Soviet economy, which is only half the size of America's, actually appears to be shrinking. In recent years, its only growth areas were gas exports and vodka sales—hardly the economic stuff of which superpowers are made.

Clearly, Russia can't modernize without cutting military spending. There will be no more butter, or even margarine, until less is spent on guns. To make sure this happens, Gorbachev has been quietly conducting a

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massive shakeup of the Soviet military. Most of the old marshals of World War II vintage have been retired and replaced by younger officers, many who earned their spurs in Afghanistan. In fact, the military has probably undergone more restructuring than any other part of Soviet society.

So far, so good. But all the newly promoted younger officers are now creating an unforeseen problem. The gouty old generals of 1940 vintage were happy with their tanks and cannon—of which the Russians have enormous numbers. The new generals, however, want a whole new generation of hi-tech weapons.

Within the next 15 years a revolution is coming in military technology. "Smart" and "brilliant" missiles will home in on distant targets. Aircraft will fly themselves and shoot down enemy planes. Ultra-high-speed computers will manage battles faster and better than any human minds.

America's Stealth bomber technology is already rendering large chunks of the Soviet Union's huge air defence system obsolescent. The USSR currently spends 18% of its military budget on its own Star Wars system for defending inner space. To do this job, 371,000 troops, 1,300 interceptors, 7,400 radars and 9,300 missile launch-

ers are kept on ready alert. The Stealth B-2 bomber and the Stealth cruise missile will now force a massive reinvestment in Russia's aerial Maginot Line—billions of dollars in new radars, missiles and computers.

Keeping up with the Jones' in the Pentagon also means billions to sustain research in Star Wars and its many branch technologies. These are all billions that Gorbachev would like to spend on the economy.

Ironically, the same generation of young officers promoted by Gorbachev is now demanding more funds to meet the 21st century's upcoming military-technological challenges. Soviet defence literature is seething with glasnost about the need for smart weapons, better command and control and exotic new technologies. The unhappy fact that many Japanese toys have more high technology in them than some current Soviet weapons systems has not been lost on the new officer class.

So it's likely the military will press demands for more money to keep up with the western imperialists and those diabolical Japanese chip makers. The enigmatic Marshal Orgarkov, whose turbulent career has taken twists and turns, seems to be spearheading the military's campaign for more hi-tech arms. Expect to hear more from him soon.

Military technology is a genie that just won't go back into the bottle. As long as the West develops new arms, Russia must tag along, and keep funding those hugely expensive "black" projects like death rays, microwave weapons and bio-toxins. For now, butter is still winning out over guns. But given the Russian obsession with military power, it may not be long before the new Soviet marshals and admirals train their guns on the cost-cutting Mikhail Gorbachev.