

"U.S. Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security," NSC 20/4, 23 November 1948

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TOP SECRET

U.S. Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security

NSC 20/4 November 23, 1948

The Problem

1. To assess and appraise existing and foreseeable threats to our national security currently posed by the USSR; and to formulate our objectives and aims as a guide in determining measures required to counter such threats.

Analysis of the Nature of the Threats

2. The will and ability of the leaders of the USSR to pursue policies which threaten the security of the United States constitute the greatest single danger to the U.S. within the foreseeable future.

3. Communist ideology and Soviet behavior clearly demonstrate that the ultimate objective of the leaders of the USSR is the domination of the world. Soviet leaders hold that the Soviet communist party is the militant vanguard of the world proletariat in its rise to political power, and that the USSR, base of the world communist movement, will not be safe until the non-communist nations have been so reduced in strength and numbers that communist influence is dominant throughout the world. The immediate goal of top priority since the recent war has been the political conquest of western Europe. The resistance of the United States is recognized by the USSR as a major obstacle to the attainment of these goals.

4. The Soviet leaders appear to be pursuing these aims by:

a. Endeavoring to insert Soviet-controlled groups into positions of power and influence everywhere, seizing every opportunity presented by weakness and instability in other states and exploiting to the utmost the techniques of infiltration and propaganda, as well as the coercive power of preponderant Soviet military strength.

b. Waging political, economic and psychological warfare against all elements resistant to communist purposes, and in particular attempting to prevent or retard the recovery of and cooperation among western European countries.

c. Building up as rapidly as possible the war potential of the Soviet orbit in anticipation of war, which in communist thinking is inevitable.

Source: Mount Holyoke College

Both the immediate purposes and the ultimate objectives of the Soviet leaders are inimical to the security of the United States and will continue to be so indefinitely.

5. The present Soviet ability to threaten U.S security by measures short [material missing]

- a. The complete and effective centralization of power throughout the USSR and the international communist movement.
- b. The persuasive appeal of a pseudo-scientific ideology promising panaceas and brought to other peoples by the intensive efforts of a modern totalitarian propaganda machine.
- c. The highly effective techniques of subversion, infiltration and capture of political power, worked out through a half a century of study and experiment.
- d. The power to use the military might of Russia, and of other countries already captured, for purposes of intimidation or, where necessary, military action.
- e. The relatively high degree of political and social instability prevailing at this time in other countries, particularly in the European countries affected by the recent war and in the colonial or backward areas on which these European areas are dependent for markets and raw materials.
- f. The ability to exploit the margin of tolerance accorded the communists and their dupes in democratic countries by virtue of the reluctance of such countries to restrict democratic freedoms merely in order to inhibit the activities of a single faction and by the failure of those countries to expose the fallacies and evils of communism.

6. It is impossible to calculate with any degree of precision the dimensions of the threat to U.S. security presented by these Soviet measures short of war. The success of these measures depends on a wide variety of currently unpredictable factors, including the degree of resistance encountered elsewhere, the effectiveness of U.S. policy, the development of relationships within the Soviet structure of power, etc. Had the United States not taken vigorous measures during the past two years to stiffen the resistance of western European and Mediterranean countries to communist pressures, most of western Europe would today have been politically captured by the communist movement. Today, barring some radical alteration of the underlying situation which would give new possibilities to the communists, the communists appear to have little chance of effecting at this juncture the political conquest of any countries west of the Luebeck-Trieste line. The unsuccessful outcome of this political offensive has in turn created serious problems for them behind the iron curtain, and their policies are today probably motivated in large measure by defensive considerations. However, it cannot be assumed that Soviet capabilities for subversion and political aggression will decrease in the next decade, and they may become even more dangerous than at present.

7. In present circumstances the capabilities of the USSR to threaten U.S. security by the use of armed forces are dangerous and immediate:

- a. The USSR, while not capable of sustained and decisive direct military attack against U.S. territory or the Western Hemisphere, is capable of serious submarine warfare and of a limited number of one-way bomber sorties.
- b. Present intelligence estimates attribute to Soviet armed forces the capability of over-running in about six months all of Continental Europe and the Near East as far as Cairo, while simultaneously occupying

Source: Mount Holyoke College

important continental points in the Far East. Meanwhile, Great Britain could be subjected to severe air and missile bombardment.

c. Russian seizure of these areas would ultimately enhance the Soviet war potential, if sufficient time were allowed and Soviet leaders were able to consolidate Russian control and to integrate Europe into the Soviet system. This would permit an eventual concentration of hostile power which would pose an unacceptable threat to the security of the United States.

8. However, rapid military expansion over Eurasia would tax Soviet logistic facilities and impose a serious strain on Russian economy. If at the same time the USSR were engaged in war with the United States, Soviet capabilities might well, in face of the strategic offensives of the United States, prove unequal to the task of holding the territories seized by the Soviet forces. If the United States were to exploit the potentialities of psychological warfare and subversive activity within the Soviet orbit, the USSR would be faced with increased disaffection, discontent, and underground opposition within the area under Soviet control.

9. Present estimates indicate that the current Soviet capabilities mentioned in 7a above will progressively increase and that by no later than 1955 the USSR will probably be capable of serious air attacks against the United States with atomic, biological and chemical weapons, of more extensive submarine operations (including the launching of short-range guided missiles), and of airborne operations to seize advance bases. However, the USSR could not, even then, successfully undertake an invasion of the United States as long as effective U.S. military forces remained in being. Soviet capabilities for overrunning western Europe and the Near East and for occupying parts of the Far East will probably still exist by 1958.

10. The Soviet capabilities and the increases thereto set forth in this paper would result in a relative increase in Soviet capabilities vis-à-vis the United States and the Western democracies unless offset by factors such as the following:

a. The success of ERP.

b. The development of Western Union and its support by the United States.

c. The increased effectiveness of the military establishments of the United States, Great Britain, and other friendly nations.

d. The development of internal dissension within the USSR and disagreements among the USSR and orbit nations.

11. The USSR has already engaged the United States in a struggle for power. While it cannot be predicted with certainty whether, or when, the present political warfare will involve armed conflict, nevertheless there exists a continuing danger of war at any time.

a. While the possibility of planned Soviet armed actions which would involve this country cannot be ruled out, a careful weighing of the various factors points to the probability that the Soviet Government is not now planning any deliberate armed action calculated to involve the United States and is still seeking to achieve its aims primarily by political means, accompanied by military intimidation.

b. War might grow out of incidents between forces in direct contact.

c. War might rise through miscalculation, through failure of either side to estimate accurately how far the other can be pushed. There is the possibility that the USSR will be tempted to take armed action under a miscalculation of the determination and willingness of the United States to resort to force in order to prevent the development of a threat intolerable to U.S. security.

12. In addition to the risk of war, a danger equally to be guarded against is the possibility that Soviet political warfare might seriously weaken the relative position of the United States, enhance Soviet strength and either lead to our ultimate defeat short of war, or force us into war under dangerously unfavorable conditions. Such a result would be facilitated by vacillation, appeasement or isolationist concepts in our foreign policy, leading to loss of our allies and influence; by internal disunity or subversion; by economic instability in the form of depression or inflation; or by either excessive or inadequate armament and foreign aid expenditures.

13. To counter threats to our national security and to create conditions conducive to a positive and in the long term mutually beneficial relationship between the Russian people and our own, it is essential that this government formulate general objectives which are capable of sustained pursuit both in time of peace and in the event of war. From the general objectives flow certain specific aims which we seek to accomplish by methods short of war, as well as certain other aims which we seek to accomplish in the event of war.

Conclusions

THREATS TO THE SECURITY OF THE UNITED STATES

14. The gravest threat to the security of the United States within the foreseeable future stems from the hostile designs and formidable power of the USSR, and from the nature of the Soviet system.

15. The political, economic, and psychological warfare which the USSR is now waging has dangerous potentialities for weakening the relative world position of the United States and disrupting its traditional institutions by means short of war, unless sufficient resistance is encountered in the policies of this and other non-communist countries.

16. The risk of war with the USSR is sufficient to warrant, in common prudence, timely and adequate preparation by the United States.

a. Even though present estimates indicate that the Soviet leaders probably do not intend deliberate armed action involving the United States at this time, the possibility of such deliberate resort to war cannot be ruled out.

b. Now and for the foreseeable future there is a continuing danger that war will arise either through Soviet miscalculation of the determination of the United States to use all the means at its command to safeguard its security, through Soviet misinterpretation of our intentions, or through U.S. miscalculation of Soviet reactions to measures which we might take.

17. Soviet domination of the potential power of Eurasia, whether achieved by armed aggression or by political and subversive means, would be strategically and politically unacceptable to the United States.

18. The capability of the United States either in peace or in the event of war to cope with threats to its security or to gain its objectives would be severely weakened by internal developments, important among which are:

Source: Mount Holyoke College

- a. Serious espionage, subversion and sabotage, particularly by concerted and well-directed communist activity.
- b. Prolonged or exaggerated economic instability.
- c. Internal political and social disunity.
- d. Inadequate or excessive armament or foreign aid expenditures.
- e. An excessive or wasteful usage of our resources in time of peace.
- f. Lessening of U.S. prestige and influence through vacillation or appeasement or lack of skill and imagination in the conduct of its foreign policy or by shirking world responsibilities.
- g. Development of a false sense of security through a deceptive change in Soviet tactics.

U.S. OBJECTIVES AND AIMS VIS-A-VIS THE USSR

19. To counter the threats to our national security and well-being posed by the USSR, our general objectives with respect to Russia, in time of peace as well as in time of war, should be:

- a. To reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat to the peace, national independence and stability of the world family of nations.
- b. To bring about a basic change in the conduct of international relations by the government in power in Russia, to conform with the purposes and principles set forth in the UN charter.

In pursuing these objectives due care must be taken to avoid permanently impairing our economy and the fundamental values and institutions inherent in our way of life.

20. We should endeavor to achieve our general objectives by methods short of war through the pursuit of the following aims:

- a. To encourage and promote the gradual retraction of undue Russian power and influence from the present perimeter areas around traditional Russian boundaries and the emergence of the satellite countries as entities independent of the USSR.
- b. To encourage the development among the Russian peoples of attitudes which may help to modify current Soviet behavior and permit a revival of the national life of groups evidencing the ability and determination to achieve and maintain national independence.
- c. To eradicate the myth by which people remote from Soviet military influence are held in a position of subservience to Moscow and to cause the world at large to see and understand the true nature of the USSR and the Soviet-directed world communist party, and to adopt a logical and realistic attitude toward them.
- d. To create situations which will compel the Soviet Government to recognize the practical undesirability of acting on the basis of its present concepts and the necessity of behaving in accordance with precepts of international conduct, as set forth in the purposes and principles of the UN charter.

21. Attainment of these aims requires that the United States:

a. Develop a level of military readiness which can be maintained as long as necessary as a deterrent to Soviet aggression, as indispensable support to our political attitude toward the USSR, as a source of encouragement to nations resisting Soviet political aggression, and as an adequate basis for immediate military commitments and for rapid mobilization should war prove unavoidable.

b. Assure the internal security of the United States against dangers of sabotage, subversion, and espionage.

c. Maximize our economic potential, including the strengthening of our peace-time economy and the establishment of essential reserves readily available in the event of war.

d. Strengthen the orientation toward the United States of the non-Soviet nations; and help such of those nations as are able and willing to make an important contribution to U.S. security, to increase their economic and political stability and their military capability.

e. Place the maximum strain on the Soviet structure of power and particularly on the relationships between Moscow and the satellite countries.

f. Keep the U.S. public fully informed and cognizant of the threats to our national security so that it will be prepared to support the measures which we must accordingly adopt.

22. In the event of war with the USSR we should endeavor by successful military and other operations to create conditions which would permit satisfactory accomplishment of U.S. objectives without a predetermined requirement for unconditional surrender. War aims supplemental to our peace-time aims should include:

a. Eliminating Soviet Russian domination in areas outside the borders of any Russian state allowed to exist after the war.

b. Destroying the structure of relationships by which the leaders of the All-Union Communist Party have been able to exert moral and disciplinary authority over individual citizens, or groups of citizens, in countries not under communist control.

c. Assuring that any regime or regimes which may exist on traditional Russian territory in the aftermath of war:

(1) Do not have sufficient military power to wage aggressive war.

(2) Impose nothing resembling the present iron curtain over contacts with the outside world.

d. In addition, if any bolshevik regime is left in any part of the Soviet Union, insuring that it does not control enough of the military-industrial potential of the Soviet Union to enable it to wage war on comparable terms with any other regime or regimes which may exist on traditional Russian territory.

e. Seeking to create postwar conditions which will:

(1) Prevent the development of power relationships dangerous to the security of the United States and international peace.

(2) Be conducive to the successful development of an effective world organization based upon the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

(3) Permit the earliest practicable discontinuance within the United States of wartime controls.

23. In pursuing the above war aims, we should avoid making irrevocable or premature decisions or commitments respecting border rearrangements, administration of government within enemy territory, independence for national minorities, or post-war responsibility for the readjustment of the inevitable political, economic, and social dislocations resulting from the war.

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<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/coldwar/nsc20-4.htm>