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Research Memorandum

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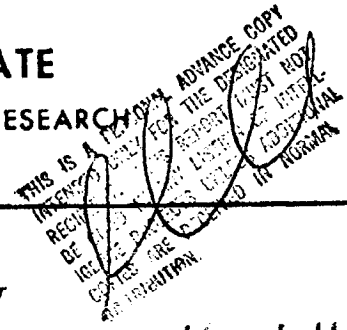

RSB-119, October 19, 1965

To : The Secretary
Through: S/S
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes Thomas L. Hughes
Subject: Soviet Criticism of the US MOL Program

Policy: 18 Points
Policy: Peaceful Uses
Policy: Space Law
Policy: MOL

A review of Soviet reactions to the President's August 25 announcement of the US manned orbital laboratory (MOL) program suggests that Soviet criticism is likely to continue, but that Moscow does not intend to overstep certain self-imposed limits.[1]

ABSTRACT

Moscow has issued a sustained series of criticisms of the American MOL program, but there has never been a high volume of propaganda on the subject. The Soviets have not criticized the concept of a manned orbital laboratory as such. On the contrary, they have reiterated their intention to launch one of their own.

The Soviets have taken advantage of the circumstance that they have never drawn a public distinction between the civilian and military aspects of their own space program to charge that the US program under the Air Force, rather than NASA, marks a new stage in American militarization of its space effort.

In private conversations, Soviets at the UN have expressed concern over the MOL program and its implications for American policy. But they have not mentioned the program in their formal speeches.

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1. This review is a follow-up to Research Memorandum RES-25, "World Reactions to the MOL Announcement," October 12, 1965 (LIMITED OFFICIAL USE).

The charge that the American MOL will engage in spying has been used in all of the commentaries as an illustration of the military missions to be performed. However, none of the Soviet commentaries revives the old Soviet argument that spaceborne reconnaissance is illegal -- the question of legal aspects of spaceborne reconnaissance is simply not addressed, presumably to avoid legal generalizations which might apply to their own spaceborne reconnaissance. One writer, Deputy Commander of the Soviet strategic rocket forces Tolubko, charged that MOL would be a step in the direction of developing an orbital weapons system. This charge has not been repeated in subsequent commentaries, even though US press stories could have been used as a peg. And the Soviets seem to have backed off from charges that questions had arisen about American intentions with respect to nonorbiting of weapons of mass destruction, lest they provoke an exchange of charges which might embarrass them.

In terms of volume and tone, Moscow could hardly have been expected to say less when presented with a target of opportunity during a period when East-West tensions were running high. Continuing commentaries suggest that the proposition that MOL represents a thrust of the American military into the cosmos is becoming a staple of Soviet propaganda destined for sustained

repetition. However, the Soviet reaction has not on the whole been characterized by a sense of urgency or alarm. For the moment, at least, Moscow seems to be more acutely concerned with the ins and outs of political exploitation of the US announcement than with the long-anticipated US MOL program as a potential strategic threat.

Initial Reaction

Moscow was not instantly critical of the President's August 25 announcement of the US MOL program, but moved quickly to exploit commentaries in the American press. The initial Soviet coverage of President Johnson's announcement was a TASS news report which summarized what he said in a straightforward fashion. Indeed, because it was an objective summary, the first TASS item put the President in a better light than he had appeared in Soviet media for some weeks before or since. But the halcyon moment was not destined to last. Even before the President's announcement, Soviet propaganda was already attacking alleged military aspects of the Gemini-5 flight which was under way. Accusations that the Gemini-5 was engaged in reconnaissance missions had been leveled in Soviet media even before the American reports that the astronauts had observed a missile launching were published, and on the very day of the President's announcement Red Star carried a long article detailing the allegation that Gemini-5 was engaged in reconnaissance. Soviet editors were already zeroing in on US space programs -- presumably because of general tensions over Vietnam and perhaps with some effort to stigmatize American tracking facilities in foreign countries -- and the Soviets were quick to seize upon the Beecher story in the Wall Street Journal as a source of illustration for the charge that the US was engaging in a militarization of its space effort.

No Attack on MOL's Per Se

Moscow has not at any point attacked the concept of manned orbital laboratories as such. On the contrary, Soviet officials have reaffirmed the Soviet Union's intention to have a MOL of its own. Soviet cosmonaut Leonov at an international meeting in Athens on September 16 talked about Soviet plans for an orbiting laboratory (something the Soviets have been alluding to on and off since 1962), and the leader of a delegation of Soviet space experts, Gorbanev, mentioned Soviet MOL plans in Tokyo on the same day.

The US announcement was, of course, noted in the American press as a departure from NASA or civilian control of manned space ventures to Air Force management of the MOL project. And since the USSR had never drawn any distinctions as to what parts of its own space programs were military or civilian, Moscow apparently felt that it was in a position to exploit the American move as part of its general denigration of American militarism.

Military Missions

Articles like Beecher's also provided Soviet commentators with the material with which to document a small but continuing series of articles depicting the MOL program as a symptom of American militarism. The charge has been documented by listings of military missions for MOL drawn from American press stories. Navigation, communications, interception of spacecraft, and anti-submarine warfare have been mentioned, but the one charge common to all of the Soviet commentaries to date has been that MOL is intended for reconnaissance.

Space Reconnaissance

While Moscow's accusations that Gemini-5 and MOL had as part of their mission spying conveyed the message that American use of space for reconnaissance was undesirable, Soviet commentaries have stopped just short of explicitly reviving Moscow's old argument that space reconnaissance was illegal. Evidently, now that Moscow has a satellite reconnaissance program of its own under way (it does not discuss publicly the reconnaissance mission of certain Cosmos series satellites), it is reluctant to reiterate contentions about illegality that would apply to Soviet programs.

Since the 1963 UN General Assembly Soviet publicists have gradually played down Moscow's contention that satellite reconnaissance is illegal. Moscow did not abandon its legal brief against satellite reconnaissance when it agreed to the October 17, 1963 UN resolution on legal principles for space activities; it merely accepted a widest-area-of-agreement approach, accepting such principles as were agreed but reserving its position on still-disputed issues. Since then, however, Moscow has given less emphasis to its legal case, and the most recent Soviet overview of the subject of space law -- in an interview in Red Star in August -- did not make any specific reference to the Soviet argument that space reconnaissance is illegal. Moscow has never publicly affirmed the contrary proposition -- that space observation is legal -- and Khrushchev's private statements tending in that direction have never been reaffirmed by his successors. However, continued silence on the legal aspect of the matter in connection with MOL suggests that Moscow's tendency increasingly to accept space reconnaissance as a fact of life continues.

Orbital Bombardment

Only one of the Soviet commentaries raised the charge that the US might be on the threshold of developing an orbital bombardment system which would violate the UN resolution against putting weapons of mass destruction into orbit. In number 37 of the weekly Life Abroad, Col. Gen. Tolubko, deputy chief of the Soviet strategic rocket forces, cited a statement from the West German newspaper Die Welt that a MOL could be used as a platform from which to drop bombs. He then went on to suggest that the US program was aimed at developing an orbital nuclear bombardment system which would lead to violation of the October 1963 UN resolution. Perhaps Tolubko was arguing in an internal debate for some space weapons program of his own (conceivably an interceptor for hostile satellites). Be that as it may, his accusation was not followed up in subsequent commentaries, and none has mentioned the subject of orbital bombardment systems.

We suspect that the principal reason for backing away from the orbital bombardment theme may be Soviet reluctance to open a debate in which Moscow might be on shaky ground. For Brezhnev is on record with a claim -- which US intelligence does not credit as valid -- that the Soviet Union possess an orbital bombardment system. In his July 3, 1965 speech to military graduates he stated that the USSR had "orbital rockets" (a different term from Khrushchev's "global" missiles). The next day a Soviet propaganda broadcast described "orbital rockets" as ones which are "shot into a terrestrial orbit from where they are capable of hitting any target on earth when needed" -- i.e., in terms which describe an orbital bombardment system.

Brezhnev's statement and the subsequent propaganda broadcast, if taken at face value as evidence that the USSR had developed an orbital bombardment system, would not per se constitute a violation of the operative paragraph (2) of the October 17, 1963 UN resolution. But they would call into question the US-Soviet exchange of intentions described in paragraph (1) of that resolution. Since President Johnson in his August 25 statement had made a point of reaffirming the US intention not to orbit weapons of mass destruction, Moscow may have preferred not to elicit a discussion of Brezhnev's odd remark and its possible bearing on the question of intentions with respect to the UN resolution.

At the UN -- The General and the Military

At the UN Outer Space Committee session, the Soviets did not publicly mention the MOL. But in his bilateral talks with NASA officials, Soviet representative Blagonravov cautioned on October 6 that the current political atmosphere would tend to limit the scope of new US-Soviet cooperation in space, and cited the American MOL program as contributing to Soviet apprehension. A Soviet Foreign Ministry officer attached to the Soviet delegation in New York, Stashevsky, elaborated on the point in a conversation with an American officer. Stashevsky said he wished to convey the serious apprehension with which the Soviet scientific community viewed not only the MOL project, but the form in which it was announced. He could not, he said, understand why it was necessary for the President himself to present the plan.

It may well be that Blagonravov, who negotiated the original agreement on US-Soviet bilateral space cooperation, is sincere in his expression of concern lest the MOL announcement represent a decline in American interest in nonmilitary aspects of space exploration. But even so, there was a touch of irony in his being the man to carry that message. For Blagonravov holds a commission as Lieutenant General of artillery and in his pre-space days was best known for his Stalin-prize-winning textbook on automatic weapons. In the flurry of commentary over the American MOL program, he seemed to forget that military participation in the Soviet space program has so long been standard practice.

Conclusions

As a matter of public posture, Moscow was already casting about for opportunities to denigrate American space activities when the American announcement of the MOL program was made. It was hardly to be expected that the Soviets would fail to attack an obvious target of opportunity. The sustained nature of the Soviet commentary on the subject suggests that these attacks are likely to continue. The charge that the American MOL program represents a new stage in American militarism's efforts to exploit outer space seems destined to remain as a staple of Soviet propaganda. Since they have never drawn a public distinction between the military and civilian portions of their own space program, the Soviets seem to feel that they are in an advantageous position to play up the distinction between NASA and Air Force management of the American MOL program.

However, Moscow's treatment of the subject, both in public and in private, suggests that Soviet concern over the policy implications of the US announcement is relatively limited. Blagonravov was probably sincere, if disingenuous, in expressing concern over the implications of the MOL announcement for US-Soviet cooperation in space. Blagonravov has long been interested in such cooperation and is presumably sensitive to developments which might make the work of getting approval in Moscow for his proposals and projects more difficult. Nevertheless, neither the MOL announcement nor the general political atmosphere characterized by tensions over Vietnam prevented Blagonravov from concluding some modest agreements with US officials in New York in early October for continued US-Soviet cooperation in space technology.

As for the broader implications of the US announcement for Soviet strategic posture, Moscow appears to have taken the US announcement in stride as a long-anticipated development. General Tolubko expressed concern over the potential of MOL to serve as a step in the development of an orbital bombardment system, and may have been trying to use the MOL announcement as a justification for advocating some military program of his own. Others whom we do not know about may be using it in this manner in private.

If Moscow's statements indicate possible concern over American use of space for reconnaissance, avoidance of old Soviet arguments about the illegality of space reconnaissance suggests that the Soviets are more interested in protecting their own satellite reconnaissance program than in trying to stigmatize satellite reconnaissance as such. References to other possible military missions seem to be merely citations of those mentioned in the American press for the purpose of stressing the military nature of the US program, but without any special treatment about implications for the USSR.

While Moscow may be concerned over strategic implications of such potential MOL applications as reconnaissance or orbital bombardment, the Soviet reaction has not on the whole been characterized by a sense of urgency or alarm. On the contrary, Soviet statements have been notable for their restraint on specific key issues and for moderation in the amount and kind of attention which has been paid to the US announcement.

In sum, for the moment at least Moscow seems to be more acutely concerned with the ins and outs of political exploitation of the US announcement than with the long-anticipated American MOL program as a potential atrategic threat. For whatever Moscow's concerns over possible strategic implications may be, they were long inherent in the possibility of a MOL, and not basically altered by the President's announcement.