The myth of the military threat

WHAT forces promote militarism in communist countries? In a world in which our lives are threatened by Soviet nuclear weapons, this is an important question.

The Soviet military establishment is one of the two most powerful in the world, along with that of the United States. As well there are other large communist military forces. The Chinese army is the largest in the world, while Vietnam has a huge army for its population. Then there are the Warsaw Pact nations and their military capacities.

The easiest answer to the question is that communist governments promote their own military strength. But who in the West helps them out?

Consider the Soviet arsenal of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). In 1960 one of the contentious issues in the US presidential election campaign was the alleged ‘missile gap’ by which the US lagged behind the Soviet Union in ICBMs.

John F Kennedy narrowly won the election. After he became president he found out the US was actually far ahead in ICBMs, with perhaps 10 times as many deliverable nuclear warheads.

The Soviet Government mounted a massive catch-up effort throughout the latter part of the 1960s and 1970s.

Today the Soviet arsenal is roughly comparable to that of the Americans. The authoritative account of the politics of Soviet military power is David Holloway's book The Soviet Union and the Arms Race.

What stimulated the Soviets in their massive ICBM program? Certainly not the peace movement in the West.

Though strong in the late 1950s, its attention to nuclear weapons faded to nothing by the mid 1960s, not to return until the 1980s.

One stimulus to the Soviet rulers was their humiliating backdown in the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

At the time, the Soviet Union was surrounded by intermediate range ballistic missiles based in places such as Turkey, South Korea and West Germany. To try to redress the balance, Soviet missiles were installed in Cuba.
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Kennedy risked global nuclear war by confronting the Soviets and forcing the removal of the missiles. Soviet political leaders realised it was they who were far behind in deliverable nuclear warheads. They vowed never to be put in such a position again, and so began a massive military build-up.

This example suggests that vocal Western proponents of military strength and confrontation actually do more than anyone else in the West to promote communist militarism.

Military races are based on mutual threats and perceptions of danger. Each side uses "the enemy" as the excuse for building up their own military strength. It is common practice to exaggerate the enemy threat in order to justify military expansion, as in the case of the "missile gap."

In the US, the excuse for militarisation in the 1960s has been the so-called "window of vulnerability" to Soviet nuclear attack.

The evidence also shows that when relations between the Soviet Union and the US are good, the Kremlin allows much greater Jewish emigration.

Under Brezhnev in the late 1970s, and with the signing of SALT II, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union increased to over 50,000 a year.

When relations soured after 1979, emigration was drastically cut back. Those who argue for a confrontational approach to the Soviet Union thereby contribute to a reduction in Jewish emigration.

Ironically, then, the best allies of Soviet militarists have in the West are those who beat the communist drum, arguing for "peace through strength" and opposing initiatives towards disarmament.

Communist hardliners see all their warnings confirmed when Washington provides support for contras attacking Nicaragua or puts massive funding into Star Wars (President Reagan's proposed orbital anti-missile defense system).

Likewise, the best allies of Western militarists are their counterparts in communist countries.

Nothing helped the Western advocates of military strength more than the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

So it is reasonable to argue that those in the West who advocate Western military strength to confront and threaten communist governments are actually effective supporters of communist militarism.

No doubt most of them are unwitting in this. But who is to say that some prominent anti-communists may not be communist governments’ "agents of influence?"