

# The Warsaw Pact, gone with a whimper

## *The cardboard castle*

Malcolm Byrne and Vojtech Mastny  
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**VIENNA:** Fifty years ago, with great fanfare in the Soviet bloc, the Warsaw Pact came into being. During its 36 years, it became one of the most feared military machines in history, the embodiment of international Communist aggression, and the sword of Damocles threatening World War III.

But fearsome as it appeared in the eyes of the West - and indeed in the experiences of millions of citizens of the Communist countries - was the Warsaw Pact ultimately as dangerous as its image suggested? With the availability of new documents from the archives of the pact's former members, answers to such questions are starting to appear.

At its outset, the pact did not even have a military function. Conjured up by Nikita Khrushchev as a putative counterpart to NATO, its original purpose was, ironically, to disappear - in return for NATO's dismantling. Western observers at the time accurately dubbed the organization a cardboard castle.

With the climax of the Berlin crisis in 1961, the Warsaw Pact finally began to assume the features of a true military organization. Just as importantly, it soon began to implement a basic strategy characterized by significant offensive elements. Internal analyses of major military exercises starting in the early 1960s reflect a shift in emphasis from mere protection of the homelands to a full-scale thrust deep into Western Europe. This remained the dominant strategy until the time of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Moreover, as nuclear weapons became more widespread, Warsaw Pact plans incorporated their pre-emptive use against Western forces.

From these bits of evidence, it might appear that the alliance was everything its harshest enemies in the West believed it to be. But the picture is more complex. Rather than reflecting a commitment to aggression, the new documentation indicates a pervasive Soviet sense of insecurity, expressed in the consistent assumption by Soviet strategic planners that NATO would initiate hostilities, even against its better judgment.

The Warsaw Pact unquestionably possessed awesome military power, and Western governments were right to prepare for facing it. But the declassified record depicts an array of weaknesses that would have blunted that power in unpredictable ways that gave its managers reason to pause.

These weaknesses took several forms. For one, the alliance was hardly the monolith some outsiders assumed. The record is replete with accounts of sharp disagreements between Moscow and its allies on such matters as Soviet domination of the alliance, the unfair cost imposed on the smaller members and the significant imbalances in the risks they would assume in a war. Resentment simmered over Moscow's apparent willingness to sacrifice its allies' populations to protect its own interests.

Another weakness resulted from the warped Soviet view of the world. Ideological preconceptions, particularly ingrained among the senior military, presumed that the West was inherently aggressive because of its being capitalist. Such judgments nullified the benefit of having extraordinary access to Western military secrets, for which there is now clear confirmation.

Beyond ideology, a fundamental lack of realism undermined the pact's ultimate potential. Scenarios of military exercises repeatedly exalted the alliance's performance while underestimating that of the enemy. Moreover, Warsaw Pact scenarios entered the realm of fantasy by presuming that nuclear strikes powerful enough to incinerate Vienna and Munich, among other cities, would somehow not impede the sweep of Soviet-led forces through Western Europe. Only in 1987 did the Polish leader Wojciech Jaruzelski remark to his Warsaw Pact colleagues: "No one should have the idea that in a nuclear war one could enjoy a cup of coffee in Paris in five or six days."

Repeatedly, the Warsaw Pact's managers felt compelled to admit that its military capabilities left much to be desired. They drew chilling lessons from the 1967 and 1973 Middle East wars. By the 1980s, there were reports of training deficiencies so substantial that, for example, the Czechoslovaks would no longer be capable of firing nuclear weapons if called upon to do so.

Clearly, the Communist alliance represented a formidable adversary, not to mention a tool of brutal internal repression. An attempt to put its reckless plans into effect would have created havoc in Europe, but could hardly have provided a reasonable chance of winning a war.

Yet in the end, the Warsaw Pact disappeared with a whimper rather than a bang, thus offering a cautionary tale about the fragility of any modern military machine.