

11

‘Weak and Mighty’: Unravelling the Enigma of Soviet Power

Hugh White

Paul Dibb was a devoted student of the Soviet Union before he ever became a student of strategy, and he made his mark as a leading analyst of Soviet military and strategic affairs long before he turned his attention to the questions of Australian defence policy and Asian strategic affairs with which his name has been so strongly associated over recent decades. Moreover, despite his leading contribution to policymaking, the intellectual discipline of intelligence analysis, honed on the Soviet target, has arguably always remained his preferred intellectual milieu.

Understanding his approach to the fascinating enigma of Soviet power is therefore central to understanding his approach to strategy, and his overall achievements as a strategist. It can be argued that, important though his contribution has been to Australian defence policy, his work as a Soviet analyst most clearly shows his formidable intellectual strengths. Moreover no one can doubt that Russia — before, during and after the Soviet era — remains his first and deepest professional love, even if it will always remain for him an intelligence ‘target’. Dibb has never lost his passion for the sheer scale, grandeur and paradoxical mysteries of Russia, so neatly encapsulated in the lines he chose as the epigram for his major work on Soviet power:

Wretched and abundant
 Oppressed and powerful
 Weak and mighty
 Mother Russia!¹

The pedestrian concerns of a small continent in the South Pacific could never quite measure up to this. Many people will have heard Dibb describe his initial reaction to Kim Beazley's invitation to shift the focus of his work from the Soviet Union to questions of Australian defence policy. 'Why would I bother with a country with 4 battalions, 100 tanks, 6 submarines, 11 warships, 75 fighters and 24 F-111s? I have been studying a country with 300 divisions, 50,000 tanks, 5,000 combat aircraft, 600 warships and 280 submarines ... let alone 20,000 nuclear warheads!'

In view of the clear centrality of Soviet strategic analysis to Dibb's intellectual and professional trajectory, it comes as rather a surprise to realise that it was only in 1974, when he was appointed head of the National Assessments Staff (NAS) in what was then the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO), that he started to really focus on strategic assessments of the Soviet Union as his major job.² His interest in the Soviet Union germinated much earlier, in the 6th form of Kings School in Pontefract (founded, as Dibb is fond of recalling, in 1139, a century before the Mongol invasion of Rus), when a geography assignment on Russia first introduced him to the extraordinary extent of the country and the magic of its placenames. By chance, that seedling was nourished when he went on to study geography at Nottingham University. He shared digs with an ex-National Service Russian linguist, and his teachers included a leading expert on Russian geography, and this became his specialty as well.

It is therefore not surprising that he found his way into work on Russia soon after arriving in Canberra from the England in 1962. He was working in the Department of Overseas Trade under Sir John 'Black Jack' McEwan. With Britain's possible entry to the European Economic Community, McEwan was interested in exploring the

1 Paul Dibb, *The Soviet Union: The Incomplete Superpower*, 2nd edn (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies and Macmillan, 1988), p. vi. The lines are from a poem by Nikolai Nekrasov.

2 Biographical details in these paragraphs from an interview with Professor Paul Dibb, 13 Aug. 2015.

potential of the Soviet Union as an alternative market for Australian wheat, and he asked Dibb to study the Soviet wheat industry. This led in 1964 to his recruitment by Stuart Harris to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) and then, in 1968, to his joining The Australian National University's (ANU) formidable band of Soviet specialists in the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSH) under the great Harry Rigby, where he produced his first book, *Siberia and the Pacific: A Study in Economic Development and Trade Prospects*.³ And it was from there that he was recruited by Bob Furlonger to join the newly established NAS as director of economic intelligence in 1970. After only four years in that role, and obviously having proved his remarkable and formidable talents both for intelligence analysis and for bureaucratic politics, was Dibb promoted at the very young age of 34 to be head of the NAS. And only then did he really start to focus on the Soviet Union as a military and strategic power.

The Soviet Target

This was an interesting time in the evolution of Australia's international and strategic outlook. Concerns about what Prime Minister Robert Menzies had a decade earlier called 'the downward thrust of Chinese communism between the Indian and Pacific oceans' had abated with the opening to China in 1972 and the consolidation of pro-Western regimes in South-East Asia. Fears about communism and adventurism in Indonesia had been dispelled by the replacement of Sukarno by Suharto and his New Order in Jakarta. The sense of a clear and present strategic risk in our immediate South-East Asian neighbourhood, which had characterised the postwar decades and inspired the forward defence policies of the 1950s and 1960s, was now passed, and Australians now felt more secure from direct local threats.

On the other hand, from the mid-1970s and for several reasons, the Soviet Union began to loom larger in Australia's strategic thinking. First, as local tensions in Asia began to reduce, the risk of a global superpower confrontation began to loom larger in Australia's threat perceptions. The reasonable view at the time was that, despite Australia's remoteness from the main theatres of conflict and the

3 Paul Dibb, *Siberia and the Pacific: A Study in Economic Development and Trade Prospects*, (New York: Praeger, 1972).

fact that we had no intention of building forces to take part in such a conflict, the possibility of a major superpower war posed the most serious military threat to Australia's wider security and national interests, especially in view of the unimaginable consequences of the global nuclear exchange that such a war would almost certainly entail.

Second, the risks of such a conflict appeared to grow in the later 1970s as Moscow took advantage of what it thought to be a period of American weakness in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the Watergate political scandal to try to expand Soviet influence in areas that had hitherto been peripheral to US–Soviet rivalry, including the Indian Ocean and the Horn of Africa. Under Admiral Sergey Gorshkov, the Soviet Navy began to compete with the US Navy to establish a global maritime presence that included an unprecedented level of activity in the Indian Ocean. In 1974, for example, the Soviets established at Berbera in Somalia what was, for a time, the largest military base outside the Warsaw Pact area. This brought the reality of Soviet power somewhat closer to home for Australia than had earlier been the case.

More broadly, in the 1970s it began to appear that the Soviets were gaining the upper hand in its competition with the United States for global primacy. Its economy was thought to be doing well and it was thought by some to have achieved parity with the United States in military power, and to be bent on pushing ahead to achieve a clear measure of superiority. And, while the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT I and II) agreements of 1972 and 1979 showed that the superpowers could negotiate arms control agreements, at the same time nuclear arsenals on both sides were growing larger and more accurate, and the fears for the stability of the central deterrent balance grew accordingly.

All of this raised great concern in Washington and London, and created an often fraught atmosphere for the evaluation of Soviet capabilities and intentions. Moreover, after 1975 Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser took an active interest in strategic affairs and was focused on the Soviet threat to Australia's interests in the global order, so there was a lot of demand in Australia for assessments of Soviet strengths and weaknesses. All of this culminated in the crisis in US–Soviet relations that followed the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which led to the final surge of the Cold War in the 1980s.

Dibb was continually engaged as head of NAS and in subsequent roles in assessing these developments from 1974 up to the time he left Defence in 1981 to join ANU. Throughout this period he was the Australian Government's principal analyst of Soviet military and strategic affairs, and one of the recognised and respected voices on these questions in the wider Western intelligence community. It was not by any means an easy role. The intellectual challenges were formidable and the stakes were high. But there were also real political and personal pressures to contend with. Judgements about Soviet military capabilities and strategic intentions easily acquired ideological overtones and became indexes, in the minds of some, of policy and political orthodoxy, and even of loyalty. Careers could be made or marred. It was not a field for the faint-hearted. Not being faint-hearted himself, Dibb thrived.

The vast bulk of his work as head of NAS was of course highly classified and will not be publicly released for a long time yet, if ever. However, in 1981 Dibb left that role and moved to the Department of International Relations and then the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at ANU. Between then and 1985, when he was recruited by Defence Minister Kim Beazley to undertake what became known as the Dibb Review, he published a great deal, and this very productive period culminated in the publication of his renowned book on the Soviet Union as an incomplete superpower (1986). From this book and his other writings in these years, and from one or two things he published even while head of NAS, we can learn a great deal about his approach to the central questions of Soviet power, both as an intelligence analyst and as an academic.

The big questions that Dibb addressed in this period included not just the nature and extent of Soviet power and the trajectory of Moscow's overall strategic intentions, but more specific questions about Soviet aims and capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region and the potential for this to affect Australia directly. These more specific issues are themselves interesting in retrospect, but the analysis that follows will focus on the broader questions of Soviet power and ambition, because Dibb himself always saw his work as aimed primarily at those issues. As well, they take on a special interest in retrospect because they touch on tantalising issues of the durability of the Soviet system, and the possibility that it might collapse. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, it is intriguing to see how Dibb assessed this possibility at a time when so many people, including many of its bitterest enemies,

saw the Soviet system as increasingly invincible. The natural focus for the study of Dobb's thinking about all this is *The Incomplete Superpower*, in which Dobb so clearly distilled decades of analysis of the Soviet target.

The Incomplete Superpower

The book that Dobb began to write in 1982 was intended primarily as a contribution to a debate among Western analysts and policymakers that had raged with increasing intensity from the second half of the 1970s about the extent of Soviet power and the nature of Soviet intentions. On one side of this debate stood the 'hawks', who believed that 'the Soviet Union has achieved decisive military superiority over the United States',⁴ and that Moscow as a result had confidence in its ability to fight and win both conventional and nuclear wars against the West, 'and so achieve its goal of global domination'.⁵ In other words they saw the Soviets as having, or being on the way to having, both the capability and the intention to dominate and transform the global order.

On the other side of this debate stood the 'doves', who believed that the Soviets were under no illusion that they could win a war with the West, and who explained the Soviet military build-up 'largely in defensive terms'.⁶ Dobb describes his own views as lying 'somewhere in the middle of the spectrum'⁷ between the hawks and the doves but, in reality, his position is much closer to the doves than the hawks, and the argument presented in *The Incomplete Superpower* is in fact an impressively sustained and detailed rebuttal of the hawks' position.

The argument is based on a methodological premise that is critical to intelligence assessment and which underpins everything Dobb wrote about the Soviet Union. This is set out explicitly in the preface to his book, where he says that it aims to present 'a perception of the world as seen from Moscow'.⁸ 'If we are to understand the Soviet Union,' he wrote, 'we should at least try to avoid imposing on it a Western

4 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 141.

5 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988).

6 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988).

7 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988).

8 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. xviii.

perspective', because 'the perceptions that the USSR has of the world around it are derived from unique cultural and historical traditions'. To avoid surprise, he says, one must 'see events from the perspective of the opposition'.⁹ Following this precept, Dobb analyses Soviet actions and policies on the basis of how things might look from Moscow.

Looking back 30 years later, and across the ruins of the Soviet Union, it seems hard now to credit the strength of the views Dobb was attacking, or the scale of the issues at stake. This was no dry academic argument. The hawks' analysis of Soviet power and intentions was influential in Washington, as well as in London, and did a lot to shape the policies of the administration of President Ronald Reagan and the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Partly as a result, the Cold War intensified sharply over the years when Dobb was writing his book, and the risk of a superpower conflict plainly grew. Robert Gates, then the senior Soviet analyst at the CIA, later called 1984 'the most dangerous year'.¹⁰ These dangers were clear to Dobb at the time, and provide the mainspring for his argument. In the preface he wrote:

If nuclear war is not to become a self-fulfilling prophecy we in the West need to understand the nature of Soviet power in a calmer, more objective way than is often the case at present. It seems to me rather too simplistic to divide the world, as some American commentators do, between the forces of good and evil. This is a dangerous attitude because it fosters a bellicose style, which can only raise East–West tensions. We should never be led by a false sense of moral self-righteousness into treating the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire', however much we may dislike the system that it stands for.¹¹

And, a few lines later, he makes explicit the moral and policy implications of his analysis:

With Herman Hesse, I believe that peace is an infinitely complex, unstable and fragile thing — more difficult to achieve than any other ethical or intellectual achievement. But if we wish to see peace continue, it does not make sense to face the Soviet leadership with

9 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. xix.

10 Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Gates refers specifically to the Abel Archer exercise that year which came close to triggering a US–Soviet conflict. Dobb also wrote about this.

11 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. xx.

either capitulation or confrontation. There is a middle path which, whilst not compromising the West's vital interest, or appeasing the Soviet Union, will ensure the continuation of non-violent competition with the USSR.¹²

Thus the basic argument of *The Incomplete Superpower* is that if we realistically assess the extent of Soviet power, and analyse the way that its leaders use that power in the light of the challenges they face as they see them, then the USSR looks less like a country set on a path to global domination, and more like a country struggling to deal with multiple threats and challenges from an inadequate and dwindling base of power. In other words, this is a country with which the West could and should learn to co-exist.

The starting point for Dibb's analysis is an assessment of Soviet power. Power is, as he says, a difficult concept: 'a concept at the heart of the relations between nations, yet few topics in strategic studies are so poorly understood.'¹³ He offers an inclusive account of the elements of power,¹⁴ including — not surprisingly for a geographer — a Mackinderian consideration of geopolitical location.¹⁵ Dibb, however, gives most attention to four elements of Soviet power — the economy, its 'empire' in the Soviet Bloc, its domestic political position and, of course, its armed forces. Each of these he examines in some detail.

The account Dibb gives of the Soviet economy is detailed, nuanced and carefully balanced, but it springs from a simple experience. Visiting the Soviet Union as an official in the mid-1970s, he was struck by the poverty and deprivation that he saw around him, as people — even senior people — stood in line for tomatoes or meat. How, he asked, could this be reconciled with the image of a country on the threshold of global dominion?¹⁶

In exploring and answering this question, Dibb acknowledges the USSR's extraordinary achievements: growth averaged 4.8 per cent per annum from 1951–79, compared to 3.5 per cent for the United States,¹⁷

12 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988).

13 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. xix.

14 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), pp. 16, 19.

15 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 21.

16 Paul Dibb, interview with the author, 13 Aug. 2015.

17 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 67.

recalling the time when serious people really did believe that it would overtake the United States to become the largest economy in the world. But, as he recounts, by the mid-1970s the growth had stalled and the economy overall was 'faltering'.¹⁸ The Soviet economy peaked at little more than half the size of America's, and might soon be overtaken by Japan's, he suggested¹⁹ — as indeed it was. There were particular problems in sectors like agriculture but, more broadly, Moscow seemed incapable of delivering the improvements in productivity that would be essential for sustained high growth. He suggested that 2 per cent was the most that could be expected over the longer term. He cautioned, however, against the more dire predictions of a looming disaster. 'Economic collapse', he wrote, 'is not in prospect'. The USSR had many resources and assets,²⁰ but it would remain what he called 'a semi-developed economy'.²¹ Economic problems, he argued, would not compel cuts to defence spending²² but this was not an economic power base from which Moscow could launch a bid for global domination.

Likewise what Dobb called the Soviet 'empire', especially in Eastern Europe, was seen as an uncertain strategic asset at best. Poor economic performance compared to the West was one key negative factor, nationalism and resentment of Soviet control was another. The increasing frailty of Moscow's hold over its east European satellites, as exemplified by developments in Poland in the early 1980s, and the very serious consequences for the internal stability of the USSR itself of any major unravelling of Soviet control there were clearly highlighted.²³ Dobb wrote presciently that:

Should widespread rebellion break out in Eastern Europe, or if a major nationality group rose up in revolt, or if the territorial integrity of the far flung Soviet state were threatened, then Soviet state power would be seriously threatened ... Politically, the uncontrolled spread of disaffection and rebellion in its East European empire would have implications for the stability of Soviet rule in the homeland.²⁴

18 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 2.

19 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988).

20 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 95.

21 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 71.

22 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 97.

23 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), pp. 29, 36.

24 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 29.

Not surprisingly, Dibb put most focus on the analysis of Soviet military power. There is no space here to do justice to the detail of his analysis, but his key point is simple and powerful. He argues that, by the early 1980s, the Soviet armed forces were indeed immense and, while their numbers had not grown since the early 1960s, their capability had developed steadily as a result of massive and sustained investments in equipment over several decades.²⁵ But to infer from this, as the hawks did at the time, that the Soviets were intent on using their armed force aggressively, and were in their own eyes close to achieving the capacity to fight and win a war for global domination, was to overlook the way Russia's strategic environment, the range of threats it faced and the forces needed to address them, looked from Moscow.

By the early 1980s the trends of the 1970s that seemed to be moving the 'correlation of world forces' in Moscow's favour had clearly started to reverse.²⁶ From that perspective, he argued, the Soviet's formidable military power was only just sufficient to keep looming threats at bay. For example, he calculated that in a full-scale conflict in the European central front, the Soviets could only expect a preponderance of 2:1 in ready combat divisions, which is well below the traditional rule of thumb that a margin of 3:1 is required on the main axis of advance to give reasonable assurance of swift victory.²⁷

One key factor in Dibb's analysis is the need to assess Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces not just against US forces but against all those that might be mobilised to fight the Soviets in a general war, including North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in Europe, Japan and even China. Russia's army might have been twice the size of America's,²⁸ but the wider balance of forces was clearly America's way. Soviet strategic planners did indeed see a worst-case scenario in which it faced all these forces as credible.²⁹ In the early 1980s, Soviet leaders were saying plainly that they believed the threat of major war from the United States had clearly and sharply increased.³⁰

25 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 144.

26 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 116.

27 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 162.

28 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 144, 159.

29 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 140.

30 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 112.

This encompassed, of course, the threat of nuclear war. While the Soviet leadership had itself abandoned the idea that nuclear war could profitably be fought and won, they remained unsure that the United States shared that view.³¹ This fear was amplified by their perceptions of trends in the US nuclear posture, including the development of highly accurate and survivable 'counterforce' weapons, and of ballistic missile defences.³² Thus, Dobb argued, the Soviets believed they had little choice but to continue to build up their own massive nuclear forces.

Dobb's basic conclusion is that 'the Soviet Union probably does not have more military power than it *thinks* it needs for defensive purposes'.³³ But he also said that Moscow was probably wrong about this: 'Does the Soviet Union have more military capability than it requires for defensive purposes? The answer is probably "yes"'.³⁴ His explanation for this misperception on Moscow's part is two-fold. One is the Russian military tradition of bigness. In responding to both nuclear and conventional threats, Russia's instincts, based on long historical experience including the Second World War, was to go for scale.³⁵ For the Soviet military mind, Dobb argued, quantity still had a quality all its own. The other elements of the explanation lie even deeper, in Russia's traditional sense of inferiority and vulnerability.

Soviet Intentions and the Weight of History

This brings us to the second key element of Dobb's analysis of the Soviet Union as a strategic actor — the question of intention. In the opening chapter of the book, he explores at some length the way our assessment of Soviet intentions must be influenced by an understanding of Russian history and the way that history has shaped Russia's view of itself and the world around it. In particular, he wrote, we have to grasp Russia's sense of its own weakness and vulnerability. The perception of weakness comes from a sense that Russia lags behind the West. Despite bravado, he says, there remains 'an uneasy

31 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 110.

32 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 122.

33 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 175.

34 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 176.

35 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 145.

sense of the backwardness still of Soviet state power'.³⁶ The perception of vulnerability comes from a history of invasion — 'at least once a century for the last millennium', culminating in the German invasion of 1941.³⁷ And both are fed by a sense of Russia's uncertain identity, neither European nor Asian but somewhere between both.³⁸ The effect of this 'is to reinforce a sense of separateness which already exists for geographical and traditional political reasons', Dibb wrote, and helps feed a jingoistic Great Russian patriotism.³⁹ This leads him to what is, in some ways, the key passage in the book:

It might thus be asked whether Russia's historical experience of invasion and war, its lack of spiritual identity with other states, and the extreme patriotism of the Russian people are a force for expansion or defence. One possible explanation is that the USSR's drive for security — whilst basically defensive because it feels menaced by the very presence of strong states and stands alone in the community of nations without any reliable friends — also has an expansionary impulse and is perceived in this way by other (especially neighbouring) countries. Soviet security can be achieved only at the expense of the security of others.⁴⁰

This naturally fed a classic security dilemma on both sides, and drove what Dibb argues is a systematic overestimate by the West of the scale of Soviet military power⁴¹ and the nature of its strategic intentions.

On the other hand, elsewhere in the book, Dibb writes of Soviet power and ambitions in terms closer to those of the anti-Soviet hawks. He says that the Soviet Union was 'the one power that might have the potential to supplant the United States as the dominant power over the international system', and that '[t]he Soviet Union has considerable strengths, which will sustain its bid for supreme power'.⁴² He remains, in other words, somewhat ambivalent about the nature of Soviet power to the end.

36 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 1.

37 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 7.

38 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 9.

39 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 10.

40 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 10.

41 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 163.

42 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 259.

Predicting Collapse

This ambivalence shows perhaps most clearly in the way Dobb addressed what is in retrospect the most tantalising question of all — the potential for the whole Soviet system to collapse. Ever since the actual collapse Dobb has modestly averred that he failed to predict it, but this is at most only half true. Throughout *The Incomplete Superpower*, and in some other writings dating back to the 1970s, he thoroughly explored the vulnerabilities of the Soviet system and considered the possibility that they would prove fatal to it. For example, in 1983 Dobb wrote the following highly prophetic words:

The coming two decades could well bring a coincidence of unrest and rebellion among increasingly restive populations in several Eastern European countries at the same time. At home, the Soviet leadership will have to grapple with increasingly serious economic problems, of a fundamental structural nature, which will bring about stagnant — or even declining — standards of living and great pressure to cut back defence spending ... In the long haul, the very 'Russianness' of the Soviet multinational state is in question.⁴³

As we have seen, *The Incomplete Superpower* correctly identified and extensively analysed the basic factors that were to lead so swiftly to the collapse of the Soviet Union and, at many points, raised the question of whether collapse loomed. Dobb nonetheless judged that the Soviet system itself was robust enough to withstand the resulting pressures. 'Above all,' he wrote,

the Soviet political elite clearly has the will to rule the Soviet Empire by traditional means, including coercion. What has been built so painstakingly in the Soviet Union over the generations with much sacrifice, ruthlessness and conviction will not be allowed to disintegrate or radically change. The USSR has enormous unused reserves of political and social stability on which to draw, and in all probability will not in the next decade face a systemic crisis that endangers its existence.⁴⁴

43 Paul Dobb, *World Political and Strategic Trends over the Next 20 Years — Their Relevance to Australia*, Working Paper No. 65 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 1983), p. 11.

44 Dobb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 30.

Later in the book, Dibb confidently asserted that ‘the Soviet Union is not now (nor will it be during the next decade) in the throes of a true systemic crisis’.⁴⁵ But, in the same section, he also wrote: ‘What remains uncertain is whether the Soviet system is entering a prolonged period of atrophy and deepening crisis or whether sufficient reforms can be introduced to muddle through.’⁴⁶ And he made this clear prediction: ‘it is possible that the USSR could eventually see its control of Eastern Europe begin to crumble later this century. A loss of control of Eastern Europe would probably strengthen centrifugal tendencies within the USSR itself.’⁴⁷

So while it is true that Dibb did not see the Soviet collapse coming, he certainly saw very clearly the pressures that were so quickly to bring it about, and recognised the possibility that the Soviet system, for all its apparent strength, might prove vulnerable to these pressures sooner rather than later. Few if any analysts saw these factors and possibilities as clearly as Dibb, and he deserves credit for understanding the weakness of the Soviet Union as well, and perhaps better, than anyone else in the Western analytic community. This was a major intellectual achievement.

The Bear is Back

Fortunately for Dibb, and for Australia, by the time the Soviet Union collapsed he had already shifted his attention to questions closer to home. But he has never lost his interest in Russia, and was among the first to detect the reappearance of some of the classic characteristics of Russian strategic outlook, which he had analysed so effectively in the Soviet era, when they reappeared in post-Soviet Russia.

In a series of writings from the early 2000s, Dibb warned that Russia should not be underestimated as a great power. It had the resources to maintain powerful forces and, above all, it had the resolve and determination, borne of the deep historical, cultural and geographic factors he had explained in *The Incomplete Superpower*, to pose

45 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 260.

46 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 264.

47 Dibb, *The Soviet Union* (1988), p. 261.

a serious challenge to the post-Cold War order in Europe and beyond, where it believed its interests were threatened. As Dobb wrote in *The American Interest* back in 2006:

A resurgent Russia will not be a recycled Soviet Union, either in terms of messianic ideology or territorial conquests. The Cold War as such will not return. But make no mistake: This renewed Russia will be strong, assertive and probably increasingly undemocratic. Its human rights record will not be pleasant, and it will definitely not be a consistent or reliable partner of the West.⁴⁸

And so it has proved.

48 Paul Dobb 'The Bear is Back', *The American Interest*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1 Nov. 2006, www.the-american-interest.com/2006/11/01/the-bear-is-back/.

This text is taken from *Geography, Power, Strategy and Defence Policy: Essays in Honour of Paul Dibb*, edited by Desmond Ball and Sheryn Lee, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.