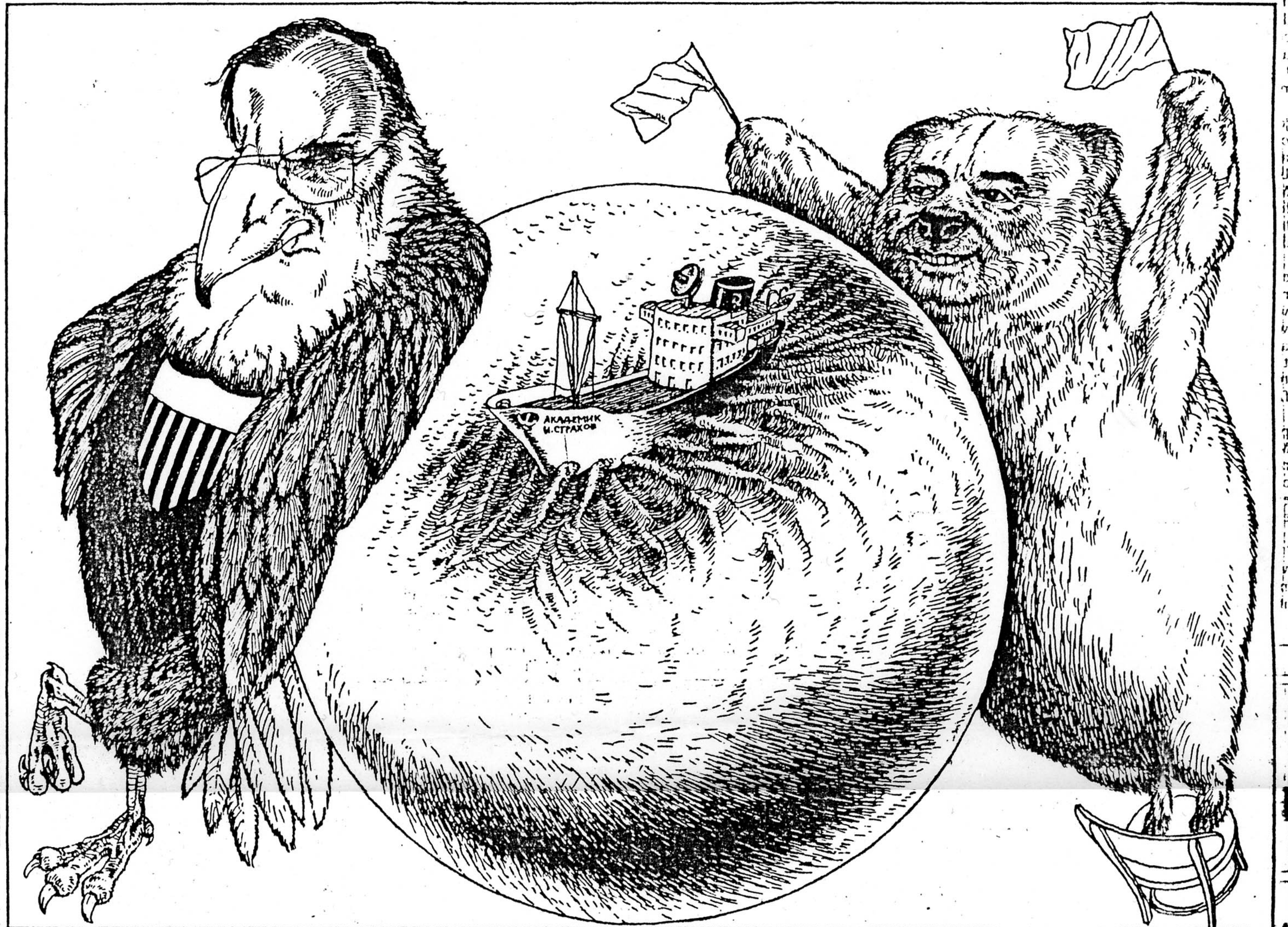
Were the Soviets trying to send us a diplomatic signal when they offered to share sensitive oceanographic data on the ocean floor off Syria? Why did the United States fail to pick up on it? A veteran Mideast correspondent gives the saga of the Soviet research ship Nikolai Strakhov a

Second Look

Soviet message missed for want of an ear

By Jim Lederman



SOVIET LEADER Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost has created a deluge of political signals emanating from the Soviet Union. But is the United States prepared to receive and analyze some of the more arcane messages?

If the story of the Soviet oceanographic ship Academician Nikolai Strakhov is a case to judge by, the answer must be "not really." Bureacratic in-

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fighting, a communications failure, narrow sectional interests and compartmentalization within the US bureaucracy are preventing senior policy makers in Washington from even receiving, let alone deciphering, some of the Soviet signals that are arriving.

Without access to these Soviet messages, US political analysts cannot effectively go about their business of rationally interpreting Soviet intentions. The resulting ignorance could have significant consequences when important, long-term policy decisions have to be made.

The problem is familiar to old Washington hands, one of whom said this week, "there are times when, despite all the intelligence material we receive, I sometimes feel like we're working in a black box."

To give but one example: Within the next year or two, the United States is going to have to decide whether to encourage the Soviets to join the Middle East peace process. For many years, US officials have feared that if the Soviets became involved, Moscow would not provide accurate information on the intentions of the Syrians and the radical Palestinian groups that the Communists have supported, and might use information shared by the United States to further Soviet interests at the expense of the peace process. Sharing sensitive data now, even in totally unrelated fields, could help develop an atmosphere of trust between the superpowers.

The case of the Strakhov, therefore, raises important and disturbing questions about whether officials in Washington are able to hear, interpret and act on messages being received from the Soviets. Until I contacted senior government policy analysts in Washington, they had never heard of the ship. When the story was told, all admitted that it had considerable political import.

A Soviet offer

The basic story is simple. In June 1987, the Strakhov set out to map the ocean floor of an area in the strategically important eastern Mediterranean bounded by Israel, Cyprus and Syria. Before the ship left, the Soviets promised Western scientists that the data collected would be made available to anyone who wanted it. Western scientists were skeptical. The only time the Soviets had ever released data of this type before had been in 1958 – and the amount of material provided had been so small and its quality so poor that it was virtually useless to international oceanographers.

Moreover, the Strakhov was to use a device called a narrow-beam/multibeam echo sounder, which produces very accurate profiles of the sea floor. This device was originally developed in the United States to provide Polaris submarines, which had to be submerged for long periods, with precise maps of the sea floor for accurate navigation. These maps are to submariners what small-scale topographical maps are to soldiers. Many scientists doubted that the Soviets would be willing to release data of such potential strategic importance.

However, the Soviets were as good as their word. In June 1988, the Soviets informed the Inter-Governmental Oceanographic Commission, sponsored by UNESCO, that the Soviet Academy of Sciences was willing to hand over the entire sonar log of the Strakhov's trip – 174,000 records of 9,000 kilometers of sonar track. It was the first time the Soviets had released raw, digitized data of this sort.

It would appear that the Soviets went to great pains to ensure that the political as well as the scientific message they were sending was well understood. They first told the former head of the Marine Geology and Geomathematics Division of the Geological Survey of Israel, John Hall, that they would send him the raw tapes if a formal request were made. The ostensible reason given was that the Soviet Union lacked the computer time needed to process the data. The Soviets then informed Paul Wolf, the former head of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to go to the Israelis to get the data. This deliberate decision to use a middleman would appear to have served three purposes: to indicate to the Israelis that the Soviet Union was open to scientific interchange, to ensure that there was a neutral international witness to the transfer of the data to the United States and to signal to both sides that the Soviet Union was willing to release raw, sensitive data and could be trusted to keep a promise.

The suggestion that a formal request for the data be made was apparently meant to signal that the transfer of the material was not a "back-channel" operation by interested scientists, but that it had the formal approval of the highest Soviet authorities. That message, however, never arrived at the State Department.

Data received

The tapes were received at NOAA on July 29, 1988. By the early fall, they had already been fully evaluated.

Donald Pryor, a NOAA scientist who took part in the evaluation, said that "it was very fragmented ... but that's not unusual or surprising in a cruise of this sort. Some data was missing and some stuff was done twice, but there is no evidence of any attempt to [censor] the material."

Although US officials deny that there was any specific agreement to trade data, NOAA reciprocated the Soviet move by sending the Soviets data from the 25th cruise of the Conrad, a US oceanographic vessel. Relations among the Soviets, the Israelis and the American scientists are said by all the parties to have remained harmonious.

Why, then, did this seemingly positive relationship and the politically potent messages that were being sent not come to the attention of senior policy analysts in Washington? Blame, if such a word can be used in this case, can be laid in several quarters.

In part, it lies with the scientists, who are highly reluctant to view the Soviet overtures as anything but a purely scientific matter. To them, the Strakhov cruise was but one part of a much broader sharing of oceanographic data that has been taking place in the past few years. They viewed this scientific glasnost, which has now included some 20 exchanges of information and visits, as the real issue – and assumed that because of its scientific importance, the message of its political significance would somehow reach policy makers in Washington.

In addition, the civilian scientists fear that if a political hue adheres to scientific exchanges in any way, it is liable to jeopardize future cooperation. One scientist said, "I want to try to avoid getting involved in this whole 'science has a strategic value' controversy because it makes our life so much more difficult."

The civilian oceanographers are also very concerned lest they be thought of as intelligence agents. "NOAA doesn't interpret intelligence and shouldn't be thought of in that way," said Pryor. "Our scientists don't carry guns and we don't act in any covert way."

The scientists at most of the major oceanographic institutes in the United States are deeply concerned that the measured increase in contacts with the Soviets not be undermined by a misperception about a threat to national security. So, one could say that the US scientists have tried to keep the whole issue of contacts with their Soviet counterparts "in house" for their own defensive reasons.

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>
> – Former Navy officer

State Department permission

Since the beginning of the US-Soviet scientific exchanges, however, scientists have often been required to seek permission from the State Department and the Department of Defense to carry out certain projects. For example, when the Thomas Washington, a ship from the Scripps Oceanographic Institute in La Jolla, Calif., wanted to enter the 200 mile exclusive economic zone off the Soviet Union's coast last year to continue mapping an underwater ridge, it had to seek formal approval from a committee made up of officials from the departments of State, Defense and Commerce.

Thus, one would think that as part of their normal efforts to follow events in the field of oceanography, officials from both the State Department and the Department of Defense would have heard at least some talk of the Strakhov affair and would have passed the message on to other policy makers in their respective departments.

The problem is that the State Department and Defense Department officials who deal with this field are subject, by their mandate, to tunnel vision. The primary concern of these officials is not what a certain signal may mean in terms of the Middle East peace process, but whether a certain project, such as the cruise of the Thomas Washington, is liable to violate US controls on the export of information on strategic items such as technologically advanced sensing systems or high-speed computers.

That leaves the Navy as the only other significant, potential communications pipeline on this issue. The Navy maintains a large oceanographic establishment and extensive contacts with civilians in this field. But for the past four years, the Navy has been at war with other oceanographers, and, at times, the two groups barely talked to each other.

Fiat from Poindexter

The battle lines were drawn on Jan. 7, 1985, when, at the Navy's request, Adm. John Poindexter, the national security adviser, issued an order forbidding the NOAA from disseminating the information it had gathered in its intensive mapping project of the US continental shelf. Civilian oceanographers protested the restrictive fiat but to no avail. Part of the difficulty the civilian scientists faced was that the Navy would not even release the reasons behind the order.

Said one leading oceanographer, "The Navy treated the entire affair as a purely internal, classified concern. Even the arguments were classified so that we couldn't respond. It was like Catch 22." Another scientist added, "The Navy tends to look at everything as a question of Soviet thievery."

In general terms, the Navy claimed that NOAA's intensive mapping of the sea floor near the US coast not only produced highly accurate maps of considerable strategic and commercial importance, but that publishing the data might also reveal how sensitive US sensing devices were. The Navy argued further that it needed to know more about the sensitivity of the Soviets' sonar devices so it could judge what might be released without compromising national secrets.

The Navy was apparently unaware that the cochairman of the Strakhov cruise, Gleb Udintsev, had already published an article in the Journal Oceanology in the summer of 1987 setting out in detail the Soviet experience with ship sonars. Moreover, American scientists had been invited on board the Soviet research vessels and had even taken part in research cruises.

Naval review

The Navy finally agreed to a review, and, according to Cap. John Chubb of the Navy oceanographer's office, a new policy statement is expected within days. However, the dispute has seriously clouded relations between Navy oceanographers and their civilian counterparts. As one of the civilian scientists put it, "The Navy sometimes looks upon the NOAA as the 'enemy.'" Said another scientist, "We tried to get the Navy to look at the broader implications of their decision and not just from the perspective you get from sitting behind a gun."

"You've got to understand the atmosphere in the Navy – especially after the Walker case," said a former naval officer familiar with the case. "Once it classifies something, it hates to downgrade a classification. There's individual self-protection in secrecy."

It was in this atmosphere of bitter interagency infighting that the information on the Strakhov arrived at NOAA headquarters. As of this week, the story of the Strakhov had not reached the office of the Navy oceanographer, Adm. Richard Pettenger. One civilian scientist claimed that the civilian scientists involved in the dispute with the Navy had been so preoccupied with the battle that they had not been able to think about anything else for months. But another NOAA scientist said, "Let me put it this way: We didn't make an effort to give them this data because we didn't feel that we had an open relationship with them."

Thus for want of an ear, for want of system that is able to pick up significant political signals, a message of considerable political importance was lost. The former Naval officer commented this week, "With glasnost, it is no longer just a question of how the Soviets are going to change, but how we are going to have to change to adapt to the new atmosphere."

Jim Lederman has just completed a tour as National Public Radio correspondent in Jerusalem.