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Matter of Fact***Air Vulnerability Shifts Grimly****By Joseph Alsop*

FAIRLY HARD EVIDENCE is now available that the Soviet air force has started series production of a six-engine turbo-prop bomber with a round-trip range of approximately 5000 miles.

In addition, it is known that the important group of aviation factories in the neighborhood of Moscow, which formerly produced the MIG-15, have now been converted to production of a new Soviet fighter. The evidence strongly suggests that this new airplane which is now in mass production, is a night and all-weather fighter for the use of the Soviet Air Defense Command.

If what is important were always news, both the foregoing small, dry paragraphs would rate eight-column headlines in American newspapers. They have, at any rate, a rather intimate meaning for every citizen of the United States.

As to Paragraph 1 above, a debate has been going on ever since 1951, when the prototype of the new Soviet strategic bomber was observed at the Moscow air show. The question was whether Type 31, as this single plane was named, presaged or did not presage a Soviet effort to turn out an aircraft comparable to our B-36.

Most intelligence experts forecast that such a plane would be in quantity production this year, after the usual interval for testing and improving the prototype. But the Pentagon, with its customary reckless optimism about Soviet deficiencies, maintained this forecast was quite groundless.

IT IS NOW ALMOST CERTAIN that the forecast has come true. The new Soviet strategic bomber is known to exist. There is every reason to believe, in addition, that it is being produced in quantity.

The meaning of these particular facts is bleakly simple. The new bomber has approximately the range and weight-carrying characteristics of the American B-36, which is the backbone of our own strategic air arm. Hence it overcomes the main weakness that the Soviet strategic air has suffered from to date.

As more and more units are equipped with the new bomber, the Soviets will cease to be dependent on the TU-4, which can only reach American targets on one-way, sacrifice missions. Every American target will be within round-trip range of the Soviet advanced bases in Kamchatka and on the Arctic fringe. In addition, the new bomber is a more modern aircraft

than the B-36, with better speed, altitude and other qualities.

As the TU-4 can be equated with our B-50, and as B-36s and B-50s make up the bulk of our Strategic Air Force, it can be seen that the Soviets are beginning to be serious competitors in this vital form of air power.

AS TO THE SECOND of the foregoing items, its significance can be equally unpleasant. To all intents and purposes, the United States has no air defense, to guard against the growing power of Soviet strategic air. As has just been revealed in this space, our air defenders are not expected to destroy more than one-tenth of 1 percent of the attackers, in the event of an air-atomic attack launched by night.

By way of contrast, the Soviet air defense is massive and well developed, having only one weakness. It now depends upon the MIG-15, which is a day fighter, blind by night. It is because of this dependence of the MIG-15 that the Soviet air defense is thought to be penetrable by our obsolescent B-36s and B-50s. Our air planners admit the B-36s and B-50s will become wholly obsolete when the Soviets can produce a good night fighter in quantity.

Concerning the Soviet night fighter, there has again been controversy. The argument was brought to a head last summer, when a Navy patrol plane was intercepted in solid soup over the Black Sea and chased, still through solid soup, all the way to Cyprus. Only a night fighter could have accomplished this.

The Air Force was still reluctant to face the facts, but an inter-service agreement was reached, nonetheless, that Soviet night fighter production was on the way.

THE CONVERSION of the Moscow factories obviously provides the missing piece in this particular puzzle. Analysts who are not warped by service special interests give the odds at approximately 4 to 1 that the conversion is being made to produce the new night fighter.

The capacity of the Moscow air complex is very large. Thus it is entirely conceivable that the 3000 to 4000 MIG-15s which now constitute the Soviet home defense force will be replaced with the new night and all-weather fighter, with its air-borne tracking radar, within two years or a little more.

Sum up these facts. On the one hand, the vulnerability of this country is again increasing, by another quantum jump. On the other hand, the vulnerability of the Soviet Union is again being lessened; the deterrent value of our Strategic Air Command is being reduced; and thus this kind of protection is also weakening. These are trends about which no sane American can be complacent.