
EAST & WEST

Is “Arms Control” an Unrealistic Fiction?

A Conversation: EUGENE V. ROSTOW & GEORGE URBAN



URBAN: Reflecting on that intricate web of negotiations which several US teams are now conducting with the Soviet Union, the layman may well wonder: Are we being governed in our assessments of Soviet power by Soviet capabilities or Soviet intentions? And if it is, as it is likely to be, both—what is the balance between them? I ask this question because

both the “what-can-they-do?” and “what-do-they-intend-to-do?” schools of thinking have distinguished advocates in the Western nuclear analysis and policy-making community. The first comes mainly from those who look upon the Soviet

Union as an ordinary power on the march, while the second tends to think of Soviet power as the self-proclaimed “fist of the international working class”, fulfilling or preparing to fulfil its millennial mission.

ROSTOW: The two perceptions—capabilities and intentions—cannot be divorced from one another. Both are extremely important; and governments, if they are wise, take both into account. At the same time, Western governments find it hard to believe, just as Western people often find it hard to believe, that the Soviet Union *is* what it *is*: a régime which has been engaged in a process of indefinite expansion for a long time.

The Mexicans and Canadians have long common borders with the United States which has an enormous capability to attack, invade, and subjugate. Yet it never crosses Mexican or Canadian minds that the Americans might do so. Why? Because the US is not a warlike society and has no missionary doctrine to follow. There is in the US no political force that could give rise to Mexican or Canadian anxieties. Yet all the states near the Soviet Union, and many that are distant from it, suffer from anxiety about Soviet aggression, infiltration, or subversion. Think of Poland, of Afghanistan, and of Cambodia, to restrict myself to recent examples.

The heart of the problem is that the Soviet Union has never accepted Article 2 (4) of the Charter of the UN as applicable to it. From the beginning of the Charter-era the Soviet Union has claimed for itself, and only for itself, the privilege of using force against the territorial integrity or political independence of states which are not governed by “socialist” régimes, or indeed of using force against “socialist” states if they are under the control of “socialist” heretics, revisionists, or schismatics, or if they show dangerous signs of backsliding to bourgeois democracy. In other words, the

EUGENE V. ROSTOW was until recently the director of President Reagan's arms control and disarmament agency, and would have been the US representative in the renewed strategic arms negotiations with the Russians in Geneva. This interview was completed shortly before his dramatic (and not yet fully explained) resignation.

Professor Rostow was for many years Dean of the Law School at Yale University, and as a Democrat served in the administrations of three Presidents (Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson).

heart of the problem is: capabilities and intentions merging in Soviet aggression.

You are, of course, quite right in saying that some people—especially our military—worry about Soviet *capabilities* exclusively. But capabilities alone, if they were purely defensive, if they were not coupled with a government policy which is overtly expansionist, would constitute no problem. But no one can say that the military posture of the Soviet Union is purely defensive. While we in the West have been primarily concerned with deterring both conventional and nuclear attacks, Soviet military doctrine and force dispositions emphasise the will and the ability to fight and win a conventional or nuclear war.

—As *"The Economist"* recently pointed out, Soviet books about war and the way the Russians conduct their manoeuvres make it clear that the Red Army is organised and trained exclusively for offensive warfare. Retreat, even a temporary period of defence, has no place in the thinking of the Soviet military planners.

ROSTOW: Of course, the Soviet government would prefer to have the fruits of military victory without having to wage war. To achieve that end, it believes, the nuclear superiority it is trying so hard to attain would be a political force of overpowering influence—the ultimate instrument of coercion and intimidation.

DOES THE SOVIET UNION'S late imperialism stem from some tacit conviction that Russia's hour as a nation has finally struck in the rotation of leading nations, using Communist ideology as a passport?

ROSTOW: The Soviet Union is still in the imperial mood of the 18th and 19th centuries—a mood the West has given up with relief. This means that the Soviet Union takes advantage of every opportunity for expansion wherever it may arise in the world and has an overall strategic doctrine. And the Russian doctrine is the old and very familiar geopolitical doctrine that he who controls the Euro-Asian land mass controls world politics. In other words, if Western Europe can be added to the Soviet dominion, then Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East too will fall. Japan and China will draw the necessary conclusions and the US will be isolated. This is a perfectly respectable doctrine which the Kremlin has been applying with considerable skill. If an opening beckons in Angola or Aden, or wherever, of course the Russians will move in. The name of their game is splitting Western Europe from the US.

—The Western world can draw on a great fund of historical experience when it comes to dealing with

nations in a mood of imperial expansion. We are less well equipped to deal with causes of a universalistic and militant character. We could not stop Hitler with non-military means, and it would now seem that we cannot stop Soviet expansionism with the "civilian" tools in our defences. Or can we?

ROSTOW: The ultimate issue of Soviet-American relations since 1917 has been defined in the nuclear arms talks with chilling clarity. It is whether the Soviet Union is a state like the others, willing to live as a member of the society of nations, and to abide by its rules—or whether the Soviet Union will persist in the suicidal view that its mission is to lead a crusade to spread the true faith by the sword or subversion.

When the matter is raised with Soviet diplomats and academics they say: "But you're asking us to change a foreign policy deeply rooted in the nature of our society and state." To that claim the only possible answer is: "Not at all. You can preach the gospel of Communism as much as you like, but the rest of the world cannot tolerate the use of aggression to achieve it. . . ."

—Isn't it one of our problems, though, that it is not necessarily through aggression that the Soviets are trying to achieve it? We can (or so we like to think) handle aggression. It is the Soviet version of *détente*—"peace" on the wrappings but "war" inside—that we appear to be, as liberal democracies, singularly ill-equipped to handle.

I just wonder whether we couldn't take our cue in fighting this from the example of the old "Committee for the Present Danger", of which you were the Chairman for several years. That Committee set itself a single broad task—to correct the military imbalance between the US and the Soviet Union, and it has done so with remarkable success. Several of its members occupy senior positions in the Reagan Administration. . . .

ROSTOW: . . . including, incidentally, the President himself. . . .

—And we can now see the Committee's policies being translated into action. The SALT II agreement has not been ratified. The US is engaged in a massive military build-up, and the nuclear imbalance is being rectified. We can foresee a time in the not too distant future when Soviet expansionism will be discouraged by the American intention and capability to stop it.

This is, however, I submit, only half the work to be done. Don't you think that public-spirited men in the USA and elsewhere ought now to think of readying our defences in the "soft" areas of trade and credit, diplomacy, culture and propaganda, so that we can also counteract Soviet policies in these much more ill-defined, much more difficult, but

equally vital areas?

At home and abroad, the Soviet system has always invested heavily in public education and propaganda. Hasn't the time come for certain symmetrical counter-measures to be applied—even though one realises that democratic society offers great (and very natural) resistance to anything smacking of national morale-boosting or an official ideology?

ROSTOW: I can offer no constructive answer to your questions. I am very much aware of the problems you have touched on, and I once commented on them in a speech I made in London. I said we were at a great disadvantage in that sort of competition with the Soviet Union because we have a different attitude to truth. *We* act as if every statement we make were made within the limits of parliamentary debate and had to respect certain rules of evidence and stand up to criticism by people of a like mind. That is to say, we assume that our critics and opponents share with us a base of goodwill, tolerance for antagonistic points of view, and respect for the rule of law. Alas, these things do not bother the Soviet Union at all, either at home or in the sort of actions they support through their apparatus abroad.

LEONID BREZHNEV, speaking at the 25th Congress in February 1976, made this very clear:

"We do not conceal the fact that we see *détente* as a way of creating more favourable conditions for the peaceful building of . . . Socialism and Communism. . . . Socialism and peace are inseparable."

And as "peace" in the Soviet vocabulary is another word for the consummation of the "world revolutionary process", we cannot say that we have not been warned.

ROSTOW: Quite. But what, you ask, can we do to neutralise the Soviet attitude? All we can do is to plug away at trying to explain what we are doing—to justify it in rational terms.

It is an unequal struggle. On the other hand, we don't seem to be doing too badly with it. People are, on the whole, sensible. They are not easily swayed by emotionalism, evocations of utopia, or pie-in-the-sky type of arguments. Nuclear anxiety at the present time seems to be rather controlled. It is weaker than it was a year or two ago. It hasn't swept away governments. But the fact that nuclear anxiety exists does mean that democratic politicians and government officials have a great obligation to explain, explain and explain again. They don't always meet this requirement.

But I am much more concerned about another kind of nuclear anxiety: that flowing from the

change in the nuclear balance, especially in ground-based ballistic missiles as distinct from other kinds of nuclear weapons. The US has made the profound mistake of allowing the Soviet Union to forge ahead in that category of weapons. It should never have happened; but it did happen, and now we are trying to offset the Soviet advantage by arms control and modernising our own forces.

That imbalance in these particularly destructive weapons is having an immense general impact, not only on politically innocent people and their demonstrations against "the Bomb", but also on serious and hard-headed Americans, some of whom are saying: "The commitments that were made by Truman and Eisenhower can get us into terrible trouble, so let's get out of the commitments. . . ." This is a dangerous train of thought. It can lead to a revival of American isolationism. Henry Kissinger added to the Western anxiety about the nuclear imbalance a few years ago with his celebrated comment that great powers do not commit suicide on behalf of their allies. And only quite recently (19 August 1982), former President Nixon wrote in the *New York Times* that the Soviet Union's achievement of superiority in land-based nuclear missiles has made our nuclear strength no longer a credible deterrent against Moscow's expansionism.

"We will [Nixon argued] not again be able to use the threat of that power as President Kennedy did in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, when we had a 15-to-1 advantage, or even as I was able to do during the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, when our advantage was far less formidable. Even if we restore the balance of those nuclear forces, we will not fully restore their deterrent effect for such purposes. A threat of mutual suicide is simply not credible."

I have just given a speech in which I criticised Mr Nixon for this view. The Administration had to consider the question: Did we want a member of the Administration to take issue with the former President directly? The fact that Mr Nixon made nuclear anxiety in this sense more acute by his comments was considered so important that I was authorised to do so.

Anxieties about the American nuclear umbrella would exist even if President Nixon and Dr Kissinger had not spoken the way they did. They are there because nuclear weapons have mysterious political side-effects. They increase people's fears; they colour their perceptions; they are what former Chancellor Schmidt called "subliminal radiations" of the state of the Soviet nuclear arsenal and the state of the Soviet-American nuclear balance. They exist because we allowed the nuclear balance to deteriorate in the 1970s; and we shall have to live with the consequences of that mistake until the balance is restored.

I have said the change in the nuclear balance may

manifest itself, in the US, in a revival of isolationism. But in Western Europe it could have much more serious effects. It could lead to European intimidation and ultimately accommodation with Soviet interests.

HERR HANS-DIETRICH GENSCHER, the German Foreign Minister, writing in the Fall, 1982 issue of "Foreign Affairs" would seem to share some of your analysis. While stressing détente as a necessary concept, he ascribes the setbacks in East-West relations in the 1970s (and the American disillusionment with détente) to American omissions in the pursuit of a policy of equilibrium. In the 1970s American arms-spending fell in real terms while that of the USSR continued to rise steadily. The US (Genscher says), suffering from the double trauma of Viet Nam and Watergate, seriously weakened its capacity to resist Soviet expansionism.

My reading of the sense of Herr Genscher's argument is: "You have unwittingly pushed us and our public opinion into seeking some form of accommodation with the Soviets by playing the power-game extremely badly. NATO strategy, based on the Harmel report, has always stood on two legs: a quest for constructive relations ('détente') combined with the maintenance of the strategic balance. You allowed the strategic balance to go and are now desperate to restore it, while discarding détente as a failure. You must, however, remember one thing: no one-legged policy—no policy of pure and simple opposition—is feasible in the nuclear age. . . ."

ROSTOW: There is no question that our failure, in the 1970s, to keep up with the Soviet arms build-up had a destabilising effect on the Alliance. In that sense I agree with Herr Genscher. There is a tendency nowadays to say that, because the unforeseeable consequences of a nuclear exchange rule out nuclear war, the existence and size of nuclear arsenals have no political influence. This is nonsense. Nuclear weapons are what seapower used to be not so many years ago. The vessels of the British Fleet did not have to be used in order to produce a political impact. Their very existence and the potential threat they represented were enough. Nuclear arsenals are a new factor in world politics; but we know that they are a very powerful factor, even though our short practical experience with this factor makes it difficult for us to think of it coherently.

Let me ask you: suppose the US had won swiftly and effectively in Viet Nam in the Israeli manner—would the "anti-Viet Nam peace movement" have arisen on the American home front?

—Most probably not.

ROSTOW: And would the US have been able to use its conventional forces in Viet Nam more effectively if the nuclear balance had not been changing to our disadvantage?

—Yes, I think it would.

ROSTOW: Right; that strange nuclear tide pervades everything in the contemporary world, whether we are thinking of the politics of military affairs or the military radiations of politics. The American press has been marking in recent days the 20th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis; and I was astonished to see quite a few articles arguing that nuclear weapons had not much to do with the outcome in 1962. That is, of course, dead *wrong*—they had *everything* to do with it. We knew that we had overwhelming nuclear superiority, and if there was any escalation, we knew that we could control it. We had, through Soviet Colonel Penkovsky, extremely good intelligence, so we knew what the Russians were doing and what they were not doing, with both their nuclear and conventional forces. We knew that we could move our conventional forces around in the Caribbean without taking risks. We knew that the Soviets would not shoot nuclear weapons at our conventional forces because of the fear of reprisal.

It is, therefore, absolutely wrong to say that the nuclear element was not important in 1962. The nuclear element was *critical* in allowing us to threaten the use of conventional forces without fear or hesitation. And that is exactly what Mr Nixon was saying in the article I have just quoted—that no American President today could do what John F. Kennedy did in Cuba in 1962. I don't agree with Mr Nixon's observation; but it is none the less a very serious point, and many in the West agree with it.

—Isn't the crucial part of Mr Nixon's statement his warning that a meaningful US superiority over the Soviet nuclear arsenal can never be recaptured:

"Even if we restore the balance of those [land-based] nuclear forces, we will not fully restore their deterrent effect. . . . A threat of mutual suicide is simply not credible."

And if that is so, what precisely will the word "deterrence" mean in our political-military vocabulary once the equilibrium has been restored between the two land-based nuclear arsenals?

ROSTOW: We must first look at the situation as it is now that the equilibrium has been disturbed. We were slightly ahead of the Soviet Union in the number of warheads on deployed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles in 1972. In 1982, the Russians had a lead in this crucial area of approximately three to one. It follows that they have the theoretical capacity to execute a pre-emptive first strike

against us by destroying our ICBMs and other nuclear forces with a fraction of their forces, holding the rest in an ominous reserve that could paralyse our remaining strategic forces. When the Soviet intermediate-range missiles are counted, the Soviet advantage in this category becomes even higher. Until this Soviet advantage is eliminated, through arms-control if possible, or the modernisation of our own strategic nuclear forces, it will not be possible to achieve world-political stability.

What we are seeking in our talks with the Soviet Union (both START and INF) is to establish nuclear stability at equal and much lower levels of force—a posture on each side which would permit us to deter both nuclear war and other forms of aggression against our interests.

—You have used the phrase “world-political stability.” Elsewhere you have repeatedly spoken of a “world public order.” I take these to mean the enforcement of the UN Charter against the international use of force and, more particularly, the end of Soviet adventures in expansionism. I notice that, in the article we’ve quoted, the German Foreign Minister talks of a European “peace order”—a phrase which is, if I read him correctly, close to détente in that it means “casting aside the basic conflict between East and West”, and building bridges of dialogue and cooperation with the Soviet Union in the hope that these will mitigate the effects of the division of Europe. How does this conception of a European “peace order” relate to your “world public order”?

ROSTOW: World public order rests on the international rule of law; but that rule cannot be attained in practice until the nuclear balance is restored. The European peace order Herr Genscher foresees—and which, I agree, is very desirable—can only come about under the umbrella of nuclear deterrence. I’m sure Herr Genscher goes along with that. Had he said that a “peace order” exists in Europe at the present time, as some people have, I would answer that Western Europe is an island: its relative immunity has rested on the Soviet belief that our nuclear weapons would indeed be used in the event of a Soviet attack.

But, as you have pointed out, the Soviets are now working away at the security of the West European island through political means—through propaganda. That erodes the “peace order” and so does, of course, the change in the nuclear balance. World public order means respecting the rules embodied in the UN Charter. These rules constitute the only possible definition for the slippery word “*détente*.” Unless the Soviet Union decides to abide by those rules, they will lose all their influence over the behaviour of any state, including those of the Western Alliance.

But let us not use the word “peace” without due care. President Reagan, in speaking of the objectives of American foreign policy, recently said: The goal of our foreign policy is to establish peace. Now, that is a very interesting word. He did not say to “restore” peace but to *establish* it. That means that what we have now is something other than peace. It reflects the realisation that from 1945, when the UN Charter was established, or indeed since 1917, the Soviet Union has considered itself exempt from the rules that bind all other states.

—Speaking informally to a group of European officials in Bonn in June 1982, the President made his meaning even clearer: “They [the Soviets] may not be fighting with us, but they are at war with us.” Would you agree with that formulation?

ROSTOW: I always agree with what my President says . . . [laughs]. I wouldn’t put it quite that way, but I see very well what he means. What we have between the Soviet Union and the West is a protracted conflict at the political level. But it is not just at the political level: it involves subversion, terrorism, and all manner of paramilitary and military acts. In the Caribbean—an area of very great sensitivity to the US—the Soviet Union is using force to help acts of aggression to be committed, establishing bases, sending guerrillas and arms. That is not peace, is it? The Kremlin is running a world campaign against the Western world and using whatever methods it can get away with. It invaded Afghanistan because the Soviet leaders correctly calculated that they could get away with it. The traffic, however, has not been all one way. The Soviets may have overreached themselves and are now visibly in trouble.

—It is a commonplace, but one that bears repeating, that arms control and disarmament talks cannot be insulated from the larger political context. They are subsidiary to resolving the East-West conflict of interests and philosophies. But deep conflicts of this sort can, if history is anything to go by, only be settled in one of three ways: (1) war; (2) pre-emptive surrender; (3) mutual exhaustion. I can recall no salvationist political system that did not go to war if its interests so demanded. Does the unique nuclear factor represent a unique historical opportunity too, so that the evidence of the past becomes, in this case, irrelevant to our concerns?

ROSTOW: The nuclear factor is different in degree, not in kind, from other mutations of military technology. Remember that a century ago Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, thought that dynamite was so destructive that it would force the human race to accept peace! His prediction turned out to be sadly wrong, but it is possible that the horrors of nuclear weapons will fulfil Nobel’s

dream. If we are reasonable and lucky, we can, I believe, avoid the use of nuclear weapons indefinitely.

But one thing we cannot do is to dis-invent nuclear power. The secret of the atom is out of the laboratory—it can never be put back. Any industrial country can make nuclear weapons. Therefore the Western nations can never give them up lest they find themselves prisoners of an Idi Amin or other irresponsible dictators. At the same time, nuclear war is unthinkable. Hence the Western world must find ways of defending itself without nuclear war.

Yet another factor we must bear in mind is this: since there can be no fireproof wall between conventional and nuclear war; since small wars can become big ones, and conventional wars can escalate to the nuclear level, the only possible policy for the West to pursue is one of complete and effective enforcement of Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter against conventional as well as nuclear aggression. *Aggression is the real issue, not the kind of weapons used.* In short, the nightmare of nuclear war should persuade all nations, including the Soviet Union, that peace really is indivisible.

But there are, at the present historical moment, also other factors that give me some hope for peace—above all the situation in Poland and what it represents. It ought to lead the Soviet Union, mired as it is in difficulties in Afghanistan and the Middle East, to want a period of stability in its relations with us.

I'm often asked: But precisely why should the Soviet leaders want to do so, seeing how disunited the West has become over Afghanistan and Poland? My answer is: because the Number One priority for any tyrannical leadership is to maintain power. The Polish situation is extremely threatening to the leadership of the Soviet Union. It is, therefore, just possible that one of the promising paths for maintaining power would seem to them to be a *genuine détente* with the US and the West: Western help to solve the economic crisis, relaxation of the arms race, and so on.

What other non-violent change can one foresee? There might be a change of policy after the departure of Mr Brezhnev. After all, the Swedes gave up their career in imperialism in the 17th century (in Western Europe, in any case) with the death of Gustavus Adolphus—though I'm not sure that the analogy fits, seeing that the Soviet commitment to expansionism is a deep one which has lasted almost three generations.

—*What, then, is your answer to my question whether the deeper East-West conflict will resolve itself by war, pre-emptive surrender, or exhaustion?*

ROSTOW: There may be a fourth way: maintaining a

stable balance with the Soviet Union *and* negotiating an effective system of collective security. That would do away with the doomsday scenarios while preserving the essential values of Western civilisation. But even if that should prove impossible to achieve, mutual exhaustion is much more likely than war. Nuclear weapons make it difficult to conceive of war. The uncertainties which a nuclear war would involve must affect the Soviet leaders as much as they affect us. Nobody can, of course, completely *exclude* the possibility of a nuclear war; but the problem we are facing is political in the first place and military only in the second.

SO YOU FORESEE a kind of Peace of Augsburg which ended the religious war in 16th-century Germany and established the principle of *cujus regio ejus religio*?

ROSTOW: I would happily settle for that.

—*But if we translate that principle into contemporary power-politics, Moscow would still retain its hold on the countries it has occupied, subverted, or invaded since 1945. Would the fact that Moscow would be left in possession of the loot not clash with the principle of a "world public order"?*

ROSTOW: We would not send in the Marines, if that's what you are hinting at.

—*The present East-West dispensation would, then, be preserved?*

ROSTOW: I don't know about that. The rising in Poland portends something quite different. If there were to be a real relaxation of tension under some "Peace of Augsburg" type of a settlement and East-Central Europe were given a great deal of political freedom without being yanked out of the Warsaw pact—would the peoples of Eastern Europe sustain this perfectly ridiculous system that works so badly? Would the Russian people? I have my doubts. The Soviet type of societies spend an inordinate amount of the national product on the military, while the standard of living is kept miserably low. And what do they get in return for the belt-tightening and the military muscle? Conquests that have gone sour. Viet Nam and Cambodia and Afghanistan and South Yemen *are* in the hands of Soviet-orientated Communists. But what do these conquests really amount to? The man-in-the-street in the Soviet Union knows perfectly well that the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Afghans will kill these local Communists, together with their Soviet supporters, at the slightest opportunity. Therefore my tentative forecast would be

that a genuine international political settlement would be followed by great domestic changes, first in Eastern Europe, and later in the Soviet Union itself. The Soviet system is exhausted, and the peoples under the Soviet system are exhausted too. There comes a time when the combination of these brings about the corruption, and then the eventual collapse, of the system.

—Let me ask you a slightly personal question. You are, as Director of ACDA, ultimately in charge of all US arms-control and disarmament negotiations. . . .

ROSTOW: . . . nominally anyway—

—and you have no doubt encountered a great many representatives of the Soviet side officially and unofficially, discussing with them nuclear weaponry and conventional force reductions; rocket “throw-weights” and infantrymen. How would you characterise the self-image of the Soviet Union as a super-power negotiating with another super-power? Is this a nation on the march with a great deal of self-confidence? Is it one which has just

pulled itself up by its own bootstraps and is seeking recognition in the world? Is it loud and militant only because it has a chip on its shoulders?

ROSTOW: A self-confident power on the march—that is the correct characterisation. The negotiators we encounter are serious people, committed to their policy and basing it on thorough intellectual preparation and doctrine. They know what they are doing, and they are doing it for reasons which seem to them fundamental.

And that is why we find it so difficult to deal with them. We can’t quite believe that they really mean what they say. We keep telling ourselves: They are bargaining . . . they are insecure . . . they don’t trust their own legitimacy . . . they want nothing more than a place in the sun. . . . All these readings of the Soviet side—continuous since 1917—are nonsense.

—So we are being faced with an imperialist power in the traditional mould?

ROSTOW: Yes, in the old mould, with ideology as its passport—like whisky smuggled inside Bibles.

Working Late

At night she hears the tap, tap, tapping.
In the bedroom with sisters sleeping
the strokes continue, tip, tap, tapping
on into the early hours.

Her father in the shed makes boxes
for sending fish to Billingsgate
a place he’s only read about
on labels for the journey.

Slender plinths supple to his hands
straightened, fixed, they are nailed into position
as the idea shapes and forms,
his name is somewhere along the side.

In the morning at the quay,
he bargains with the fishermen
bodies slither and glint in the boat,
scales of rainbows glance under the sky.

A steel bridge spans in a little hoop
over a flickering tide, blister of sea,
he bends protectively
securing down the lids.

At the back of the van, stacked in rows
the catch travels to Westport, Dublin, then London
bound for a salesman he has not met
and will never know.

Deirdre Shanahan