

Maneuver, Mobile Defense, and the NATO Central Front

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In response to the Reagan Administration's plan to increase defense spending significantly, a highly visible group of critics has emerged which argues that spending greater amounts of money is not the answer to American problems. According to these critics, the shortcomings in America's defense posture are largely the consequence of overly sophisticated weaponry and flawed doctrine.¹ The most prominent example of this latter deficiency is NATO's strategy of forward defense, which is designed to engage the attacking Warsaw Pact forces in large-scale battles of attrition along the inter-German border. The critics maintain that this strategy will lead to ruin and that therefore NATO should adopt a fundamentally different approach—a maneuver-oriented defense.² Since this argument has received widespread public attention while attracting

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1. Two of the most prominent examples of this viewpoint are: James Fallows, *National Defense* (New York: Random House, 1981); and Franklin C. Spinney, "Defense Facts of Life" (unpublished paper), December 5, 1980.

2. See Steven L. Canby, "Mutual Force Reductions: A Military Perspective," *International Security*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Winter 1978), pp. 122–135; Steven L. Canby, "NATO: Reassessing the Conventional Wisdoms," *Survival*, XIX, No. 4 (July/August 1977), pp. 164–168; Fallows, *National Defense*, pp. 19–34; William S. Lind, "Military Doctrine, Force Structure, and the Defense Decision-Making Process," *Air University Review*, XXX, No. 4 (May–June 1979), pp. 21–27; William S. Lind, "Some Doctrinal Questions for the United States Army," *Military Review*, LVII, No. 3 (March 1977), pp. 54–65; Edward N. Luttwak, "The Operational Level of War," *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter 1980/81), pp. 61–79; and Edward N. Luttwak, "The American Style of Warfare and the Military Balance," *Survival*, XXI, No. 2 (March/April 1979), pp. 57–60. Also see questions submitted by Senator Gary Hart in U.S. Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Hearings on DOD Authorization for Appropriations for FY 1979, Part 2*, 95th Cong., 2nd Sess. (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1978), pp. 1572–1575; and in U.S. Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Hearings on the DOD Authorization for Appropriations for FY 1980, Part 1*, 96th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1979), pp. 676–678. For an interesting discussion about the members of this school, see Morton Kondracke, "Defense Without Mirrors," *The New Republic*, January 24, 1981, pp. 11–13.

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very little critical treatment, it is appropriate to examine the case for a maneuver-oriented defense.³

Proponents of maneuver argue that there are two types or methods of warfare between which a defender can choose: attrition and maneuver. Attrition warfare emphasizes directly engaging the main body of the attacker's forces and relying on firepower to wear down the opponent in a series of slugging matches. "The object of military action is physical destruction of the enemy."⁴ Maneuver warfare, on the other hand, calls for the defender to avoid bloody battles and instead to maneuver his forces so that they can strike at the attacker's Achilles' heel. Much emphasis is also placed on presenting the attacker with "a series of rapid and unexpected moves" which will "break the spirit and will of the enemy high command" and "destroy the enemy's mental cohesion."⁵ Not surprisingly, the advocates of a maneuver-oriented defense have an undisguised contempt for the attrition warfare that they identify with the American military. To make matters worse, however, NATO has adopted "the American style of warfare." This is reflected in NATO's attrition-oriented strategy of forward defense.

In essence, forward defense means that NATO will meet and attempt to thwart a Pact attack at the inter-German border. The aim is to prevent the Pact from penetrating into West Germany by stopping an offensive before it makes any headway. Appropriately, NATO has deployed the majority of its forces in linear fashion along the 800-km Central Front, where they expect to meet the attacking Pact forces from prepared positions. NATO's principal objective will be to wear down the Pact's forces by engaging them in attrition warfare. U.S. Army doctrine makes this point clearly: "The purpose of defensive operations is to kill enough men and vehicles to convince the enemy that his attack is too costly and he must break it off."⁶

Although the emphasis is certainly on attrition, NATO commanders recognize that they must utilize the mobility inherent in their mechanized forces to shift them about the battlefield to reinforce threatened positions and to

3. For a recent attempt to debate the merits of a maneuver-oriented defense, see the "Symposium" in *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Fall 1980), pp. 70-87.

4. Lind, "Military Doctrine," p. 22.

5. Lind, "Military Doctrine," p. 23.

6. FM 71-100, *Armored and Mechanized Division Operations* (Washington D.C.: Dept. of the Army, September 29, 1978), p. 5-1. This emphasis on attrition is also reflected in the U.S. Army's capstone field manual, FM 100-5, *Operations* (Washington D.C.: Dept. of the Army, July 1, 1976), chapters 1-3, 5; and in the equivalent German field manual, HDv 100/100, *Command and Control* (Bonn: Ministry of Defense, September 1973), chapter 27.

deliver counterattacks.⁷ It is widely acknowledged that it will be necessary to maneuver the forward-deployed forces to insure that NATO's defense is elastic and not brittle. However, this is a limited form of mobility. NATO forces can move about within the specific corps sectors to which they are assigned (NATO's front is divided into eight corps sectors), and it is also possible to "bump" forces from one corps sector into an adjacent one. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that NATO's forces do not have *strategic* mobility.⁸ By and large, they are restricted to fighting in specific areas of the NATO front. In short, there is simply not a great deal of flexibility built into NATO's deployment pattern.⁹

The proponents of a maneuver-oriented defense object to NATO's strategy basically for two reasons. First, they maintain that the Pact, by concentrating overwhelming force at specific points, can easily pierce NATO's linear-shaped defense. Once this is accomplished, these analysts claim that NATO is doomed, since it does not have adequate reserves for dealing with a large-scale breakthrough.¹⁰ Second, the maneuver proponents reject NATO's emphasis on attrition warfare. They maintain that for an outnumbered defender like NATO, engaging in a war of attrition is not feasible. In such a slugging match, victory will go to the side with superior resources—which they believe would be the Pact. Most importantly, they reject NATO's attrition-oriented strategy because they feel that there is an alternative which promises the outnumbered defender victory at a low cost: maneuver-oriented defense.

7. For example, FM 71-100 (p. 5-2) states: "As the enemy attack moves into the defended area, it encounters fires of increased intensity delivered from the front and *especially the flanks*. The defender *constantly shifts forces* to take maximum advantage of the terrain and put himself in a favorable posture to attack [emphasis mine]." Also see General Bernard Rogers' (former U.S. Army Chief of Staff and present commander of NATO) comments in *Hearings for FY 1980*, pp. 676-678. This emphasis on using tactical mobility (see fn. 8) to support a forward defense is also clearly reflected in the German field manual *HDv 100/100* (see chapter 27). Also see fn. 52 and the attendant text.

8. Although it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between tactical and strategic mobility, it is important to define these terms carefully. Strategic mobility obtains when one has the capability to move a significant number of forces to virtually all parts of the theater of battle to engage the attacking forces. A force with strategic mobility has a very great radius of movement within the theater of battle. Tactical mobility, on the other hand, is the ability to move forces to a limited number of parts of the theater of battle.

9. However, it is very important to note that NATO does have some reserves located in its rear. They will be used to reinforce those forward-deployed forces which have to thwart the Pact's main attacks. Especially important is the fact that NATO is presently making arrangements to deploy an American corps (3 divisions) as a reserve in the northern half of West Germany. Heretofore, there have been no American forces and few reserve units in this region.

10. This pessimism is most clearly reflected in Lind, "Doctrinal Questions," pp. 56, 63. Also see Canby, "Mutual Force Reductions," pp. 124-125.

At first glance, the case for a maneuver-oriented defense is very appealing: there is no need to spend large sums of money to strengthen NATO's forces; and there is the promise of a stunning, yet bloodless battlefield success. A close examination of the prescribed maneuver-oriented defense, however, reveals a fundamentally flawed idea. At best, it is a vague prescription so lacking in substance that its impact on future policy will be negligible. At worst, it is a formula for disaster.

A major problem with the case for a maneuver-oriented defense is that it has not been outlined in sufficient detail. The proposed strategy is defined in vague generalities, thus making it difficult to determine how it works. As noted, its proponents argue that NATO must maneuver its forces about the battlefield so as to present the Soviets with "rapid and unexpected moves" that will "destroy [their] . . . mental cohesion" and "break [their] . . . spirit and will."¹¹ This sounds appealing, but what do these rapid and unexpected moves look like? *How* are they going to lead to the collapse of the attacking forces? Given the unwieldy nature of modern armies and the attendant command and control problems, one cannot help but wonder how the defender is going to be able to move his forces so rapidly and intelligently that the result will be the unravelling of the attacking forces. Instead of providing a detailed explanation of how the Soviet war machine will be rendered helpless, the maneuver advocates offer explanations such as this:

While it [maneuver warfare] is often characterized by strikes into the enemy's flank and rear, tactics are never a formula; they vary almost infinitely to take advantage of the weaknesses of the specific opponent in the specific time and place.¹²

The maneuver advocates are somewhat more specific when they mention that the attacking forces have an Achilles' heel that should be sought out and targeted. In essence, this means striking against the exposed flanks of the attacking forces and meeting those second-echelon forces that will be following behind the main armored spearheads.¹³ Even here, however, the discussion is ambiguous. All the critically important questions are left unanswered. For example, how are NATO's forces to be deployed before the attack? Where exactly is the offense's Achilles' heel and how is NATO going to reach it? Moreover, why should the Pact leave itself open to such a

11. Lind, "Military Doctrine," p. 22.

12. William S. Lind, Letter, *Army*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (March 1981), p. 4.

13. See Luttwak, "American Style," p. 58.

devastating blow? And finally, what chain of events is going to lead to the collapse of the Pact offensive? The maneuver proponents have very definite views on what a Pact offensive will look like. Likewise, they should be able to provide a detailed explanation of precisely how NATO is going to stymie it.

The need for greater specificity is reinforced by the fact that there are no historical examples of a maneuver-oriented defense that has defeated an armored offensive. The maneuver advocates claim that in the Second World War, the German Army, which is invariably portrayed as maneuver-oriented, abandoned the strategy after 1941—just as the Soviets were beginning to assume the offensive.¹⁴ Nevertheless, one maneuver advocate goes so far as to argue that “Germany could have beaten the Soviet Union had the maneuver doctrine not been abandoned after 1941.”¹⁵ Again, it would be helpful to know exactly how such a feat could have been accomplished.¹⁶

In contrast to this lack of specificity on the part of the proponents of maneuver warfare, the “other side” in this debate has advanced a comprehensive strategy for meeting a Soviet attack; that strategy is one of forward defense. In effect, they have moved beyond the simple maneuver-attrition dichotomy and operationalized attrition warfare. The maneuver advocates have yet to do this, which explains in large part why so much criticism has been aimed at NATO’s forward defense strategy and so little at the case for a maneuver-oriented defense. It is impossible to argue against maneuver as an abstract concept, just as it is very difficult to be against a strategy which calls for inflicting a decisive defeat on an opponent without having to engage in bloody battles. Before such an argument can be taken seriously, it must be taken out of the realm of the abstract and placed squarely in the NATO context. It is necessary to explain exactly how this maneuver-oriented defense works.

Maneuver and Mobile Defense

Although the maneuver advocates have not clearly stipulated what NATO’s defensive strategy should look like, it is possible to ascertain from their

14. Lind, “Doctrinal Questions,” pp. 59–60; and Lind, “Military Doctrine,” p. 23.

15. Lind, “Doctrinal Questions,” p. 60.

16. For a direct challenge to this claim, see Colonel J. R. Alford, *Mobile Defense: The Pervasive Myth* (London: Dept. of War Studies, King’s College, 1977), pp. 104–145.

general arguments that what they are prescribing is a mobile defense.¹⁷ They call for the abandonment of forward defense, by definition an attrition-oriented strategy.¹⁸ Theirs is not a case for forward defense with increased emphasis on maneuver; they are arguing for a fundamental shift in strategy. This fact, coupled with the emphasis on maneuvering forces about the battlefield, can only mean a mobile defense.¹⁹

Unlike a forward defense, a mobile defense calls for placing a small number of forces along the inter-German border, while locating the brunt of the defending forces in one or more powerful operational reserves. The defender literally ushers the attacking forces into his rear,²⁰ where he seeks to defeat them by maneuvering his main forces to where they can deliver a devastating blow against the attacker's Achilles' heel. In effect, this means striking at the attacker's lengthening flanks (which will undoubtedly be protected by second-echelon forces) and severing the lines of communication which connect the armored spearheads with their bases. This is certainly a very offensive-minded defensive strategy.²¹ With a mobile defense, the danger that the Pact

17. Others who have examined their arguments have reached the same conclusion. See Phillip A. Karber's contribution to the "Symposium" in *Armed Forces and Society*, pp. 70-75; and Major Richard H. Sinnreich, "Tactical Doctrine or Dogma?" *Army*, Vol. 29, No. 9 (September 1979), p. 17. Also see Colonel Wayne A. Downing, "U.S. Army Operations Doctrine," *Military Review*, LXI, No. 1 (January 1981), pp. 64-73. It is clear from Downing, who argues for a maneuver-oriented defense, that this strategy is synonymous with a mobile defense. Downing, unlike the other maneuver advocates, outlines his strategic ideas in sufficient detail.

18. Responding to Phillip Karber's charge that Edward Luttwak's ideas on maneuver require the abandonment of NATO's forward defense strategy, Steven Canby denied this. Canby writes, "Luttwak has not argued against the NATO strategy of forward defense" (Canby in "Symposium," p. 84). However, Luttwak himself has written that "the politically-imposed theater strategy of forward defense precludes the adoption of the only operational methods [maneuver] that would offer some opportunity to prevail over a materially more powerful enemy" (Luttwak, "Operational Level," p. 79). Of course, Luttwak is the more reliable source concerning his own ideas. This confusion is a manifestation of the vagueness which characterizes the arguments of the maneuver advocates. One final point is in order concerning this confusion. Canby clearly implies in his defense of Luttwak that forward defense is compatible with his and Luttwak's ideas of maneuver. However, Canby has written elsewhere: "Operationally NATO has made the cardinal error of disposing its forces in cordon fashion, the 'layer-cake' in NATO jargon. This distribution of forces . . . is useful for symbolic effect . . . but as a posture for conventional warfare, it is a prescription for defeat-in-detail by armored forces penetrating in depth [emphasis mine]" (Canby, "Mutual Force Reductions," pp. 124-125).

19. I can think of no other recognized defensive strategy that has much in common with the maneuver-oriented defense.

20. Luttwak writes, "A manoeuvre alternative . . . might deploy all-armoured and highly agile strike forces which would side-step the oncoming thrust of Soviet armour columns . . ." Luttwak, "American Style," p. 58.

21. There is some evidence that the advocates of a mobile defense are really in favor of having NATO develop its own offensive capability. At least one has explicitly stated his preference for

will break into NATO's rear and meet with little opposition disappears. Equally important, NATO is no longer relegated to fighting a war of attrition. By adroitly maneuvering its forces to strike at the attacker's most vulnerable points, NATO can score what Liddell Hart referred to as a "bloodless victory."

Although the mobile defense may appear at first glance to be an attractive strategy, it is not a viable option for NATO. When carefully examined in the abstract, it is evident that a mobile defense has serious shortcomings; and when analyzed in the NATO context, it is clear that its adoption would lead to disaster.

Mobile Defense in Theory

A mobile defense is a terribly risky strategy.²² The reason is simple: the defender's task is exacting and there is virtually no margin for error. Consider how a mobile defense is conducted. First, the defender must slow the attacker's main forces with a *small* portion of his own force, commonly referred to as the "fixing force," making sure that the attacker does not penetrate too deeply into the defender's rear. Simultaneously, the defender must locate the offense's vulnerable points and then deliver the decisive blow against them before the attacking forces land a knock-out blow. If the fixing force is overrun, if the defender has problems finding the attacker's Achilles' heel, or if the defender is slow in delivering this counterstroke, then the offense will undoubtedly triumph. A *blitzkrieg* depends for success on the deep strategic penetration, which leads to a complete paralysis of the defense.²³ The attacking forces, after making the initial breakthrough, attempt to drive straight into the depths of the defense, cutting lines of communication and overrunning key nodal points in the defender's communications network as they proceed. This pattern is clearly reflected in the German *blitzkrieg* against France (May 1940) and the Israeli *blitzkrieg* against Egypt (June 1967). By allowing the attacking forces into his rear, the defender is actually allowing the attacker to complete part of his task. The defender is wagering, however, that despite allowing the offense this initial advantage, he can still knock him

striking into East Germany in the case of a Pact attack. See Edward Luttwak's comments in "Can the U.S. Defend Itself?" *Time*, April 3, 1978, p. 21. As will be subsequently discussed, any military force that can effect a mobile defense surely has significant offensive capability.

22. For a superb examination of the concept of a mobile defense, see Alford, *Mobile Defense*.

23. See B. H. Liddell Hart, *Memoirs, I* (London: Cassell, 1967), pp. 64–65; *HDv 100/100*, chapters 30–31; and Luttwak, "Operational Level," pp. 67–73.

out before the attacker gets so deep that the defense collapses. Such a strategy leaves no room for second chances.²⁴ The risks involved with a mobile defense are recognized by at least one of the maneuver advocates, who candidly states that his proposed strategy "is not by any means a fully analyzed idea, and it is, of course, at the *extreme* end of the risk/payoff spectrum."²⁵

With a mobile defense, it is imperative to have exceptional command and control so that the defending forces can be maneuvered about on what promises to be a very fluid battlefield. This raises an important issue which bears on the previous discussion. As noted, the armored spearheads in a *blitzkrieg* concentrate on driving directly into the defender's rear, maneuvering around enemy strongpoints when necessary, but otherwise racing straight ahead.²⁶ The mobile defender, on the other hand, will have to rely on maneuver in its classic sense, since he will have to move his main forces into a position where they can strike at the weak points along the attacker's flanks. Although the attacking forces face a formidable task, the defender's task is even more demanding. Even with superb command and control, the sheer size of modern combat units greatly limits one's flexibility to move them from point to point.²⁷ Maneuvering large units on the battlefield is a

24. It should be noted that in those exceptional cases where a defender has great amounts of territory to trade for time, as well as a substantial number of reserves, then he may very well be afforded a second chance. This is what happened to the Soviets in World War II. However, as will be discussed, NATO has little strategic depth.

25. Luttwak, "American Style," p. 87 (emphasis mine). In a different article, Luttwak emphasizes "the vulnerability of relational-maneuver methods to catastrophic failure" (Luttwak, "Operational Level," p. 65).

26. Prior to the mid-19th century, armies were small enough in size that maneuver was a very important element in warfare. Much emphasis was placed on encircling an opponent's army by striking at his exposed flanks. This was possible, not only because armies were small enough so that they could be moved about quite easily, but also because these armies had exposed flanks. With the advent of the mass army, and the increases in firepower available to those armies, not only was flexibility greatly reduced, but armies rarely had exposed flanks. Thus, it was pointless to talk about encircling armies which were stretched to cover extremely broad fronts. In place of the classic concept of maneuver, army leaders began searching for ways to penetrate the opponent's front. For a discussion of this distinction between maneuver and penetration, see Wilhelm Balck's classic *Development of Tactics—World War*, trans. Harry Bell (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: The General Service Schools Press, 1922); and Hermann Foertsch, *The Art of Modern Warfare* (New York: Oskar Piest, 1940). The German Army's "Infiltration Tactics," which were used in their March 1918 offensive on the Western Front (see Balck, pp. 260–293), as well as the *blitzkrieg* (see sources cited in fn. 23), emphasize penetration and not maneuver in the classic sense.

27. For example, consider the difficulty Patton had pulling his battle-hardened Third Army out of the Allied front in December 1944, turning it 90 degrees, and then moving north to attack the flanks of the German forces which had just penetrated the Allied front in the Ardennes Forest. See H. Essame, *Patton: A Study In Command* (New York: Scribner's, 1974), pp. 224–233.

formidable undertaking, especially when compared with the attacker's task of simply racing forward, avoiding enemy strongpoints. In light of this asymmetry, it is likely that the attacker, not the defender, will deliver the knockout blow.²⁸

There is another asymmetry which increases the risk of employing a mobile defense. A mobile defense requires excellent intelligence, since the defender must be able to locate the offense's weak points quickly.²⁹ Conversely, it is essential that the attacker's intelligence be deficient so that he will not be able to determine where the defender will deliver his counterstroke. It is highly unlikely that such a disparity in capabilities will obtain in a war between the Warsaw Pact and NATO.

The matter of risk aside, a mobile defense does not favor an outnumbered defender. In fact, the opposite is true. As a rule of thumb, defense analysts agree that an attacker would need somewhat more than a 3 to 1 force advantage at the point of main attack to overwhelm the defense, where the defender is fighting from fixed or prepared positions.³⁰ In such a circumstance, an outnumbered defender is capable of stopping an offensive. For the defender, the balance is least favorable when he cannot fight from protected positions, but must instead engage the attacking forces on an open battlefield. Such duels, which are usually referred to as "meeting engagements" or "encounter battles," are, in effect, the clashing of two offensive forces. In such cases, the defender enjoys none of the advantages that accrue to him when he fights from prepared positions. Thus, an outnumbered defender is likely to find himself in serious trouble in an encounter battle.

It is hardly surprising that the Soviets much prefer encounter battles to engaging NATO forces located in protected positions.³¹ By moving from a forward defense to a mobile defense, the defender would be abandoning a strategy which emphasizes fighting from prepared positions for one which favors encounter battles. Accordingly, with a mobile defense, the defender

28. The defender's task is even more complicated if the attacker employs more than one main axis of advance (as the Soviets are expected to do). In such a case, the defender must employ an appropriate number of operational reserves. Since it is imperative that each operational reserve successfully thwart the attacking forces in its area of responsibility, the risks associated with such a defensive strategy are very great. For an excellent discussion of this matter, see Alford, *Mobile Defense*, pp. 11-14.

29. See Luttwak's trenchant comments on this matter in "Operational Level," p. 65.

30. See General William E. DePuy, "Technology and Tactics in Defense of Europe," *Army*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (April 1979), pp. 14-23. Also see FM 100-5, p. 3-4.

31. See Christopher Donnelly, "The Soviet Ground Forces," in *The Soviet War Machine*, edited by Ray Bonds (New York: Chartwell, 1976), pp. 166-171.

would need at least as many, if not more forces than the attacker. The manpower demands of a forward defense, on the other hand, would be much less since the defender would be fighting from prepared positions.

Of course, advocates of a mobile defense would argue that the main forces of the offense and the defense will not engage each other. Instead, the mobile defender will use a small fixing force to slow the attacker's main body of forces while the defender's powerful operational reserve strikes against the attacker's vulnerable flanks, bringing him to his knees. As noted, this is a very difficult and risky operation which only a first-rate army could carry out.³² Moreover, it assumes that the offense will accommodate the defense—a dubious assumption.

The attacker, as he drives into the depths of the defense, will be very conscious of the fact that his lengthening flanks are vulnerable to a counterstroke. He will undoubtedly seek to protect the flanks of his expanding salient. For a number of reasons, the attacker should be able to develop relatively strong defensive positions along his flanks. First, the Soviet Army, because it is almost completely mechanized, will be able to move second-echelon forces into the salient rapidly so that they can take up defensive positions along the exposed flanks.³³ Second, the proliferation of precision-guided munitions (PGM) should greatly facilitate the attacker's task of protecting those flanks. Finally, by studying the terrain beforehand and properly utilizing available intelligence during the battle, the attacker should be able to determine where the defender's counterstroke is likely to be delivered and to make the necessary preparations to thwart it. In effect, the attacker would be in a position to meet the defender's counterstroke from protected positions—thus standing the conventional wisdom, that the defender enjoys a 3 to 1 advantage, on its head.³⁴

32. In his examination of German defensive strategy on the Eastern Front in World War II, Alford can only find one example of where the Germans actually attempted to employ a mobile defense. That was in a battle to the west of Leningrad in February 1944. The German effort failed, mainly because the Soviets overran the fixing force. See Alford, *Mobile Defense*, pp. 23, 121–123.

33. For example, the Germans made extensive preparations in 1940 to move second-echelon forces into their expanding salient for the purpose of protecting their exposed flanks. See Franz Halder, "Operational Basis for the First Phase of the French Campaign in 1940 (MS # P-151)" in *World War II German Military Studies*, edited by Donald S. Detwiler (New York: Garland, 1979), XII, pp. 18–19. The Soviet Army would be in a better position to accomplish this task than were the Germans in 1940—simply because Soviet second-echelon forces, unlike the equivalent German forces, are fully mechanized.

34. Taking this a step further, the defender's fixing force, since it is merely attempting to slow the main body of attacking forces, must, by definition, be involved in a very mobile form of

There is another major problem with a mobile defense. It is an unsatisfactory strategy for dealing with an attacker whose military objective is limited to capturing a slice of the defender's territory. What if the attacking forces, after penetrating into the defender's rear, simply stop and transition to a defensive posture before the defender delivers his main attack? The defender would then have to launch an attack against this offensive force, now occupying defensive positions. In effect, the original roles of the defender and the attacker would be reversed—hardly a desirable situation.

Mobile Defense and NATO

A fundamental question that has been begging for an answer throughout this discussion is: how well suited are NATO's forces for conducting a mobile defense? It is clear that NATO is not capable of employing this demanding strategy for several reasons. First, the NATO force on the Central Front is comprised of armies from six countries (including the French, but not the Canadians). These armies do not speak a common language, they have all been trained differently, and they are of uneven quality. The command and control problems associated with maneuvering such a heterogeneous force on a battlefield would be legion. The *sine qua non* of a mobile defense is superb command and control; and NATO's variegated structure is a mighty impediment to good command and control. The language problem alone would present great difficulties. For example, very few officers in the American Army speak German, let alone French, Dutch, or Flemish. To rectify the problem of different training experiences, it would be necessary to have large-scale training exercises so that the various armies could learn to fight together as a cohesive unit. This, however, would be virtually impossible since there are not adequate training sites in West Germany for such large-scale operations.³⁵

If one considers the particular armies, the German Army is the only one that might have the wherewithal to conduct a mobile defense. The Americans, the British, and the French (not to mention the Dutch and the Belgians)

warfare. Thus, one has a situation where the defender's outnumbered forces (the fixing force) do not have the benefit of fighting from fixed positions, while the attacker's outnumbered forces are situated in fixed positions along the flanks of the expanding salient. From the defender's perspective, this asymmetry is disturbing.

35. See Ulrich De Mazière, *Rational Deployment of Forces on the Central Front*, study prepared for the Western Economic Union, April 2, 1975, p. 29.

are simply not prepared at this time to engage in such a demanding type of warfare with any reasonable expectation of success, nor is this situation likely to change in the foreseeable future.³⁶ Nevertheless, any defense of NATO would have to assign a large role to these armies.³⁷ In short, not only is NATO an amalgamation of armies but it is an amalgamation of armies of varying quality. This makes it virtually impossible to adopt a mobile defense.

Second, the geography of West Germany is not suitable for a mobile defense. West Germany is a long and narrow country and, as such, has little strategic depth. The defender, should he attempt to trade space for time as called for with a mobile defense, would quickly find himself backed up against the Rhine and the West German border. NATO will not have much room in which to make adjustments to a Warsaw Pact offensive. NATO will have to deliver its counterstroke quickly and with great precision. Also, many of NATO's key lines of communication run in a north-south direction and are located near the inter-German border. Frankfurt, a critical nodal point in NATO's communications network, is located a mere 100 kilometers from the inter-German border.³⁸ If these lines of communication were severed, which would undoubtedly occur with a mobile defense, it is difficult to see how NATO could continue to maintain a coherent defense.

Third, the terrain in West Germany does not lend itself to a mobile defense. For the most part, West Germany is covered with a wide variety of obstacles; there are few open areas which are conducive to the large-scale maneuvering of armored forces.³⁹ This circumstance would hinder the defender because

36. Aside from the question of the quality of NATO's various armies, it should be noted that a number of units that would be expected to take part in a European conflict are not presently located in West Germany. Very importantly, these units would be at a serious disadvantage in conducting a mobile defense, simply because they would not be familiar with the terrain.

37. Luttwak argues that while NATO's "high-quality forces" must be used in the operational reserve, "lower-cost forces" can be employed as the fixing force (Luttwak, "American Style," p. 59). Presumably, he believes that this latter task is ideally suited for NATO's weaker units. However, such is not the case. Containing the attacking armored spearheads is a most difficult and important task (see fn. 32) and high-quality forces are required. It is unrealistic to think that "lower-cost forces" or second-rate troops, which would be significantly outnumbered, could accomplish the formidable job of conducting retrograde operations against the attacker's main forces.

38. Generally, the lines of communication in Germany run in a pattern that is similar to a figure 8. Frankfurt is located in the center of the 8 and is the critical link between the northern and southern circles.

39. The southern portion of West Germany, which is mountainous and covered with forests, is generally considered to be obstacle-ridden territory which would present an attacker with significant problems. Northern Germany, on the other hand, is often portrayed as ideal territory for an armored offensive. However, this is not the case. Although there are few mountains in

it restricts freedom of movement—which should be maximized when employing a mobile defense.⁴⁰ Regarding the attacker, he is faced with a limited number of defined axes of advance, most of which tend to channel forces as they move across Germany. It would be very difficult for the Soviets to move rapidly along these axes if NATO were to defend them. And since the most obstacle-ridden terrain in West Germany is along the inter-German border, it would be to NATO's advantage to meet an attack as far forward as possible. In short, NATO would be well-advised to meet the Pact's attacking forces head-on as they move along these axes, instead of allowing them to penetrate into Germany—where the terrain, for the most part, would not facilitate the defender's efforts to maneuver his forces into a position where they could deliver a decisive blow.

A close look at three of the most likely axes of attack highlights the importance of meeting the Soviets immediately after they cross into West Germany.⁴¹ It is widely agreed that the Soviets will place a main axis across the North German Plain, which is covered, in large part, by the British corps sector. There is significant urban sprawl in this region, most of which is located between Hannover (in the middle of the sector) and the inter-German border.⁴² Armored forces simply will not be able to move rapidly through this urbanized area if NATO defends it. NATO has a vested interest in forcing the Pact to fight costly battles as its forces attempt to traverse the North German Plain. (See figure 1.)

A second likely axis is the Göttingen Corridor, which extends from Göttingen, near the inter-German border, to the Ruhr. The eastern half of this corridor, extending from Paderborn to the border, is covered with obstacles

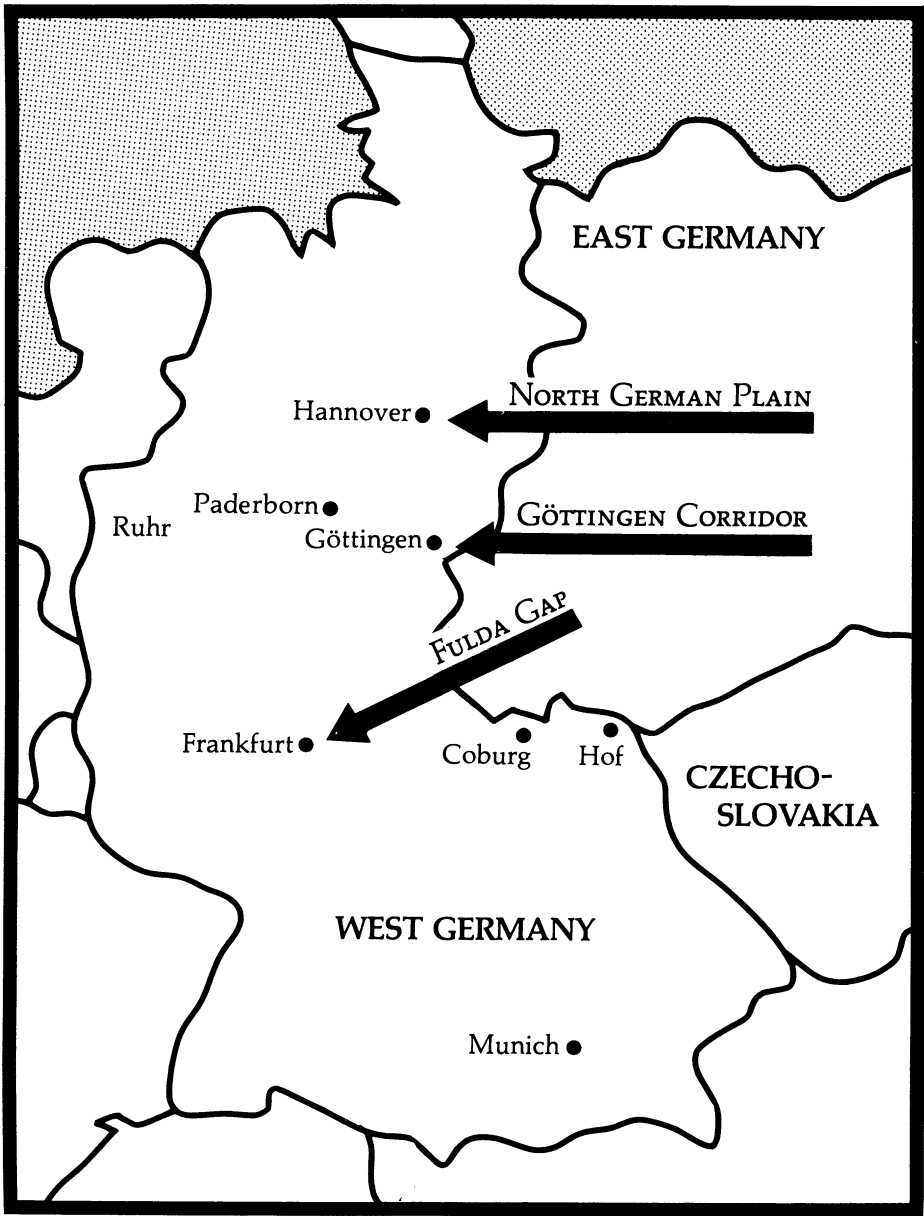
the north, there are numerous obstacles (rivers, bogs, urban sprawl, etc.). See Paul Bracken, "Urban Sprawl and NATO Defense," *Survival*, XVIII, No. 6 (November/December 1976), pp. 254–260; General James H. Polk, "The North German Plain Attack Scenario: Threat or Illusion?" *Strategic Review*, VIII, No. 3 (Summer 1980), pp. 60–66; and *FM 100–5*, pp. 14–15–14–27.

40. Obstacle-ridden terrain not only hinders the defender by restricting freedom of movement, it also limits the number of points in the attacker's flanks which the defender can strike. Thus, the attacker is better able to anticipate where the defender's counterstroke will be delivered.

41. Aside from these three possible avenues of attack, there are actually very few others (the axes which run through Hof and Coburg in southern Germany are the most likely alternatives). And certainly, none of the others are as attractive as the three considered here. The notion that the Soviets can pick any point along the Central Front, mass their forces, and then pierce NATO's front, is not a realistic one. For this reason, NATO forces, in the context of a forward defense, should be well-positioned and equipped with the necessary contingency plans for meeting a Soviet attack.

42. See Bracken, "Urban Sprawl," p. 256; Polk, "The North German Plain Attack Scenario," pp. 61–62; and *FM 100–5*, p. 14–17.

Figure 1: Most Likely Axes of Advance in a Warsaw Pact Attack Against NATO



that would channel the attacking forces and facilitate the defender's task of thwarting a deep strategic penetration. The territory to the west of Paderborn, on the other hand, is virtually obstacle-free and therefore ideal for maneuvering large armored forces.⁴³ Although this is excellent terrain for employing a mobile defense, it would make absolutely no sense to allow the attacking forces to pass through the more obstacle-ridden eastern half of the corridor and then engage them in a free-wheeling armored battle on the doorstep of the Ruhr. As the Germans argue in their principal field manual, "Surrendering terrain for no compelling reason goes against the essence of the defense."⁴⁴ NATO should meet the Soviets at the inter-German border and bleed them white as they attempt to move toward Paderborn.

Finally, there is the possibility of an attack from the Thuringian Bulge, through the Fulda Gap, aimed at Frankfurt. As noted, Frankfurt is of crucial importance for the defense of Germany; since it is located a mere 100 kilometers from the border, NATO cannot afford to risk employing a mobile defense in this sector. Instead, NATO will have to meet an attack on this axis as close to the border as possible so as to guarantee that Frankfurt is not overrun. This should not cause any significant problems, since the axis is rather well defined and lends itself to a forward defense.⁴⁵

The Soviet Threat

When choosing the optimum defensive strategy for NATO, it is essential to consider how the Soviets plan to fight a conventional war. The Soviets emphasize that should a war start, they want to be in a position to win a quick and decisive victory. Appropriately, their forces are configured for a short war; and throughout their writings they emphasize the importance of using deep strategic penetrations to defeat NATO quickly.⁴⁶ As noted earlier,

43. This is one of the few such areas in West Germany.

44. *HDv 100/100*, p. 27-5.

45. Analyzing the merits and deficiencies of NATO's strategy of forward defense is outside the scope of this article. However, it should be noted that in light of the limited number of avenues of attack available to the Soviets, the obstacle-ridden nature of West Germany, and the fact that the most likely axes of attack are rather well defined, there is every reason to believe that a forward defense is well suited for NATO.

46. See Christopher N. Donnelly, "Tactical Problems Facing the Soviet Army: Recent Debates in the Soviet Military Press," *International Defense Review*, Vol. 11, No. 9 (1978), pp. 1405-1412; and Christopher N. Donnelly, "Soviet Tactics for Overcoming NATO Anti-Tank Defenses," *International Defense Review*, Vol. 12, No. 7 (1979), pp. 1099-1106. Concerning the organization of Soviet ground forces for a short war, see Donnelly, "The Soviet Ground Forces"; and John Hemsley, "The Soviet Ground Forces," in *Soviet Military Power and Performance*, edited by John Erickson and E. J. Feuchtwanger (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1979), pp. 66-68.

the Soviets hope to engage NATO's main forces in encounter battles, rather than having to dislodge them from prepared positions. They certainly do not want to repeat their experience on the Eastern Front in World War II, where they were engaged with the Germans in a lengthy war of attrition. Hence, the best way to deter the Soviets in a crisis is to convince them that a war in Europe will be a lengthy, costly struggle.

A mobile defense means that the conflict will be a wide open, free-wheeling one, which is precisely the kind of war the Soviets are likely to think that they can win. After all, the Soviets have prepared themselves for such an eventuality and, furthermore, it should be obvious to them that NATO would have major problems handling a mobile defense. It is hard to imagine the Soviets' accepting the assumption that NATO would be more adept than they at fighting on a fluid battlefield. Why accommodate the Soviets by fighting on their terms? Why not make them fight the kind of war that they find categorically distasteful and for which they are unprepared?⁴⁷ In other words, why not force the Soviets to engage in a war of attrition? This is precisely what a forward defense is designed to do.

The maneuver advocates have the same negative attitude towards a prospective war of attrition as do the Soviets. These Western analysts maintain that threatening to engage the Soviets in a protracted slugging match is an unacceptable defensive strategy. They argue that NATO has an alternative: by adopting a mobile defense, NATO can avoid a war of attrition and decisively defeat a Warsaw Pact offensive. They are wrong, however. Even if NATO were capable of employing a mobile defense to defeat a Pact offensive (a dubious assumption), that would not end the war. The Soviet Union has the capability to raise massive new armies, and it is nearly certain that those new armies would not fall prey to the mistakes that doomed their predecessors. As Heinz Guderian wrote about the Soviet Union's performance in World War II,

Our adversaries so far as they were accessible to our first onslaught, were beaten by our new methods. They did not hesitate to learn from their defeats and, supported by their recurring numerical and material superiority, they

47. In a recent article, two respected experts on the Soviet military argue that the Soviets place "a disproportionately high value on any measure taken which enables the attacker to avoid the need to fight through prepared defensive positions [emphasis in original]." See Peter W. Vigor and Christopher N. Donnelly, "The Manchurian Campaign and Modern Strategy," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1980), p. 169. Also see Phillip A. Karber, "The Soviet Anti-Tank Debate," *Survival*, XVIII, No. 3 (May/June 1976), pp. 105–111.

then turned our own combat methods against us with the same result as in World War I.⁴⁸

It is virtually impossible to defeat the Soviets decisively in a land war in Europe. NATO simply cannot escape a war of attrition with the Soviets, unless the Pact wins a quick and decisive victory. Successful execution of a mobile defense would only result in a short-term victory that would quickly be forgotten as the war turned into a long and costly struggle.

Mobile Defense and Crisis Stability

A mobile defense not only fails to provide an alternative to a war of attrition; it also presents a potentially unstable situation. If NATO's forces were capable of conducting a mobile defense, those same forces would surely have a significant offensive capability. As noted, a mobile defense is actually a very offensive-minded defensive strategy. Its principal ingredient is the counterstroke, which is an offensive tactic. An army that could satisfy the demands of a mobile defense would be well suited for conducting offensive operations.

If NATO had a realistic offensive capability, it would not be unreasonable to assume that in a crisis, serious consideration would be given to striking first. Thus, a highly unstable situation would obtain, since both the Pact and NATO would be considering offensive operations. Moreover, since each side would undoubtedly be aware of the other's offensive capabilities, there would be great pressure on both sides to launch a preemptive strike. Currently, there is virtually no chance that NATO would launch an offensive, since NATO is capable only of defensive operations. It is the Pact that must be deterred, and the best way to achieve that end is to convince its military leaders that an offensive would lead to a lengthy war of attrition. A forward defense provides the best means for insuring this outcome. A mobile defense, on the other hand, would lead to a situation where both the Warsaw Pact and NATO would be contemplating military action.⁴⁹

48. Heinz Guderian, "Unification or Coordination: The Armed Forces Problem (MS # T-113)," in *World War II German Military Studies*, VI, p. 11. Also see B. H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: William Morrow, 1948), chapter 16.

49. As noted earlier, the German Army (which is widely recognized as the finest army in Europe—the Soviets' included) is the only army in NATO that might be capable of effecting a mobile defense. Thus, if NATO were to pursue this strategy, the responsibilities as well as the size of the German Army would have to be increased. For a mobile defense to have any chance

Conclusion

This discussion has focused on the purely military aspects of mobile defense. It is very important to note, however, that even if this strategy were feasible and desirable from a military viewpoint, it would be politically unacceptable to the West Germans. They have continually emphasized that "there can be no alternative to forward defense . . . any conceptual model of defense involving the surrender of territory is unacceptable."⁵⁰ The Germans are not going to change their minds on this matter. For understandable reasons, they have no interest in turning their country into a giant battlefield.⁵¹ Thus, any attempt to pressure the Germans into accepting a mobile defense is bound to cause very serious trouble within the alliance. Given existing tensions among the Allies, that would be a most unwelcome development—the more so since this strategy is a blueprint for disaster on the battlefield. The inviolability of the German commitment to forward defense raises an important issue. The maneuver advocates argue that attrition warfare is characteristic of the American military. The implication is that the Americans have adopted a deficient strategy, which they then foisted on their allies. There is no evidence, however, that the American way of defending against a Soviet attack is different in any meaningful way from the German way or the Dutch way.⁵² More importantly, there is no evidence that the Germans,

of succeeding, the German Army would have to assume a greater share of the defense burden. Therefore, a mobile defense would not only result in a NATO with real offensive capability, but one which was largely dominated by Germany—a development with very significant political consequences.

50. *White Paper 1979: The Security of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Development of the Federal Armed Forces* (Bonn: Federal Minister of Defense, September 4, 1979), p. 126. To appreciate fully the importance that the Germans place on holding as much of their territory as possible, one only has to review the controversy surrounding the leaking of the minutes of the National Security Council meeting where the Carter Administration's Presidential Review Memorandum No. 10 (PRM-10) was discussed. See Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Conceding Defeat in Europe," *Washington Post*, August 4, 1977, Sec. A, p. 19; Edward Walsh, "'Pullback' Policy in Europe is Denied," *Washington Post*, August 4, 1977, Sec. A, p. 12; and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown's testimony in U.S. Congress, Senate Subcommittee on Manpower and Personnel of the Armed Services Committee, *Hearing on NATO Posture and Initiatives*, 95th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington D.C.: GPO, August 3, 1977). Undoubtedly, one of the reasons that the maneuver advocates have not clearly outlined their strategy is that they recognize that if they did so, the Germans would reject their arguments.

51. One of the main conclusions of Alford's excellent study is that nations rarely employ a mobile defense for political as well as military reasons. See Alford, *Mobile Defense*, p. 279.

52. This is evident from a comparison of the chapters on defense in the capstone field manuals of the German and American Armies (*HDv 100/100* and *FM 100-5*, respectively). Also see fns. 6 and 7.

or any of the Allies, are dissatisfied with the present strategy of forward defense. On the contrary, it is the Germans who vigilantly watch their alliance partners to insure that they remain duly committed to forward defense. Ironically, it is a handful of Americans who are calling for abandoning forward defense.

Instead of heeding this bad advice, NATO should concentrate on improving its capability to implement a strategy of forward defense. In this regard, every effort should be made to insure that NATO has adequate reserves for reinforcing potential trouble spots along the forward line. More specifically, it is imperative that the plan to locate an American corps in reserve in the northern part of Germany be completed. Furthermore, it is essential to insure that the Belgians, the Dutch, and the British continue to appropriate monies to support forces capable of protecting their respective corps sectors. Finally, NATO must insure that its component armies recognize the importance of tactical mobility. It will be necessary to maneuver NATO's forward-deployed forces about the battlefield to deliver counterattacks and to reinforce threatened units. Although a forward defense is somewhat rigid by design, NATO must seek to maximize flexibility. In the end, there is no reason why NATO, employing a forward defense, should not be able to thwart a Soviet offensive. Certainly, a forward defense holds more promise of accomplishing this than a mobile defense.