

# Prospects for conventional deterrence in Europe

*With political, military, and technical barriers restraining any plan to improve NATO's conventional strategy, nuclear deterrence may play an even more important role in European defense in the coming years.*

by John J. Mearsheimer

THERE HAS BEEN peace in Europe for 40 years now. No crisis in Europe during that period, except possibly in Berlin, threatened to lead to war. Moreover, it is commonplace to hear defense experts of different political persuasions claim that they find it difficult to imagine circumstances under which the Soviets would strike into Western Europe.

Either of two general explanations can account for this remarkable stability. First, there has been and continues to be no political reason why the Soviets would even consider attacking. The second explanation rejects the notion that there has been no political rationale for Soviet aggression and argues instead that the Soviets have been deterred by the potential costs and risks of military action.

Considering how little we know about the Soviet Union, it is difficult to determine which explanation is the more apt. Nevertheless, NATO has a formidable military posture, well-suited to deterring the Soviets, should they think about moving against the Alliance. That deterrent posture is comprised of both nuclear and conventional forces and, as I have argued elsewhere, NATO's powerful conventional forces could presumably thwart a Soviet blitzkrieg.<sup>1</sup>

NATO should be able to prevent the Soviets from winning a quick and decisive victory and then turn the conflict into a protracted war of attrition—in which the Soviets could not be confident of success. When one assesses the risks that the Soviets would face in a conventional war against the Western alliance, as well as the tremendous threat associated with the presence of thousands of nuclear weapons in Europe, there is good reason to be highly confident about NATO's deterrent posture.

There is, to be sure, an influential body of opinion which argues that NATO's deterrent posture is flawed with criticism directed at both the nuclear and conventional elements of that deterrent force. There appears to be, however, a widespread belief that there is a favorable outlook for improving NATO's conventional forces. This would be especially good news for those who support reduced reliance on nuclear weapons, although enthusiasm for improving

*John J. Mearsheimer is an associate professor in the political science department at the University of Chicago. He is the author of Conventional Deterrence, which won the 1983 Edgar S. Furniss, Jr., Award.*

the conventional balance is certainly not restricted to opponents of nuclear deterrence.

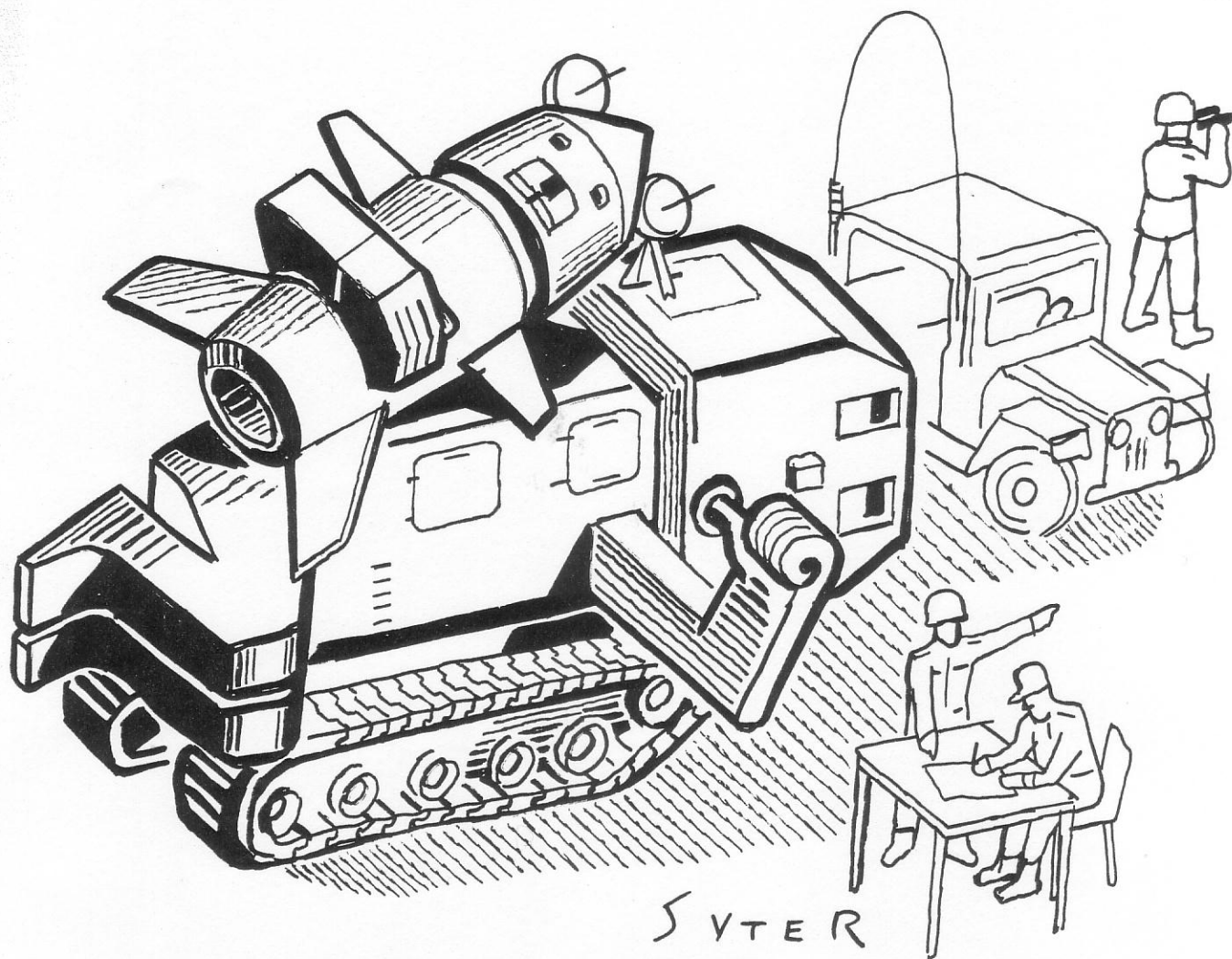
My purpose here is to examine the prospects for improving NATO's conventional deterrent. The analysis will not include an assessment of likely trends in the Warsaw Pact's force structure, the assumption being that the future will mirror the present. This assumption, however, should not ignore the possibility that the Soviets and their allies might find it difficult to maintain their present force levels. My principal conclusion is that it is very unlikely that there will be any improvement in NATO's conventional deterrent. In fact, there is reason to think that the conventional balance might shift against NATO in the decades ahead.

TO DETERMINE what is necessary to improve NATO's conventional deterrent, one must have a theory of conventional deterrence, that is, a clear conception of the conditions under which an adversary is likely to go to war. Then, one can determine how to improve the conventional deterrent.

Deterrence is most likely to fail in a crisis if a potential attacker thinks that it is possible to win a quick and decisive victory.<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely that a state's decision-makers will opt for war if they envision a lengthy war of attrition—even if they believe that they will ultimately prevail. Rapid and decisive victories on the modern armored battlefield are the result of implementing a specific military strategy, the blitzkrieg. An examination of the principal armored wars of the past half century illustrates this point.

Consider, for example, the German victory against the Allies in May 1940 and the Israeli triumph in the Sinai in 1967—two of the most widely heralded military operations of the twentieth century. Both the Germans and the Israelis employed a blitzkrieg strategy. Most importantly for deterrence purposes, it was the *belief* that they could effect a blitzkrieg that led in each case to the decision to launch an offensive.<sup>3</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that the Soviets, who would be fighting on an armored battlefield that markedly resembles the battlefields of 1940 and 1967, would face basically the same calculations that confronted German and Israeli decision-makers.

The blitzkrieg is predicated on the assumption that the opponent's army is a large and complex machine, geared to fighting along a well-established defensive line. In that army's rear lies a vulnerable network, comprised of numer-



David Suter, United States

ous lines of communication along which supplies as well as information move, and key nodal points at which the various lines intersect. Destruction of this central nervous system is tantamount to destruction of the army and is therefore the principal aim of the attacking forces.

Thus, a blitzkrieg is comprised of essentially two operations: the *breakthrough battle*, where the attacking forces pierce the defender's forward positions, and the *deep strategic penetration*, where the attacking forces wreak havoc in the defender's rear support network. To accomplish the first task, the attacker concentrates his armored forces at one or two specific points along the defender's front, hoping to achieve an overwhelming force advantage that will allow him to pierce the defender's forward line. Once the breakthrough is accomplished, the attacker seeks to avoid further contact with the defender's main body of forces and instead concentrates on driving as rapidly as possible into the defender's rear, severing lines of communication and destroying key junctures in the defender's command and control network.

The key question for our purposes is: how can NATO significantly improve its prospects of thwarting a Soviet

blitzkrieg? There is only one answer: increase the number of its fighting units on the central front. NATO must build a larger force structure if it hopes to improve its conventional deterrent in other than marginal ways. This becomes clear when one considers what NATO must do to thwart a blitzkrieg:

- First, the Soviets must not be allowed to pierce NATO's forward defenses. NATO's ability to prevent the adversary from winning a breakthrough battle will be largely a function of force-to-space ratios plus the ratio of opposing forces at those points of main attack. NATO's forward positions, in other words, must be manned by large numbers of units, so that individual units have to cover only small portions of the front, and so that the opponent cannot achieve decisive force advantages on the main avenues of attack. There is reason to believe that NATO is now in good shape on these counts.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, to achieve a truly robust conventional deterrent, NATO must increase the number of divisions it has deployed along the intra-German and Czech-German borders.

- Second, if the Warsaw Pact should rupture NATO's forward positions, NATO needs powerful operational re-



serves that can prevent the Pact forces from effecting a deep strategic penetration. NATO must have units at the rear that can be moved forward to contain those attacking forces that pierce the forward defensive positions. Today, NATO has only small operational reserves; these must be significantly augmented if the prospects of halting a blitzkrieg are to be improved.

The outlook for increasing the number of NATO's fighting units, however, is not promising. In fact, there is good reason to believe that the size of NATO's standing forces will decrease in the years ahead. The principal reason is demographics. Virtually all of our European allies are facing very sharp drops in the size of their manpower pools.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the West German case. The *Bundeswehr*, which provides approximately 50 percent of NATO's ground forces on the central front, numbers 495,000 men. To support that force with the present conscription system, 225,000 conscripts are needed each year. There were 290,000 men available for conscription in 1982, thus creating a surplus of manpower. That figure, however, will drop to 225,000 by 1987 and will plummet to 140,000 by 1994.<sup>6</sup> These staggering figures mean that in a little over 20 years the size of the draft-age cohort in Germany will have been halved. Official German studies predict that with the present conscription system the *Bundeswehr* will shrink from 495,000 to 290,000 by 1995.

Germany can pursue a variety of measures that will enable it to maintain present force levels, but these steps will involve significant political and economic costs. The recent acrimonious debate over increasing the term of service for conscripts from 15 to 18 months highlights this point. It is difficult to imagine circumstances under which Germany will increase its force levels; it is much easier to envision at least some reduction.

Diminution of the *Bundeswehr* will undoubtedly have an adverse impact on the attitudes of the other West European countries which have severe demographic—not to mention economic—problems of their own. The Belgians, the British, and the Dutch will in all likelihood use any case of German reductions to justify scaling back their own force levels on the central front. The French, who are presently reducing the size of their conventional forces, are hardly likely to compensate for reductions by others.

That leaves the Americans, but if anything, there appears to be a growing sentiment in the United States to pull forces out of Europe. The principal reason for this attitude is the belief that Europeans are not contributing enough to the NATO effort. Of course, any reduction in the size of the *Bundeswehr* or other European military forces is likely to exacerbate the problem by fueling that sentiment for "bringing the boys home." The reductions would probably not motivate Americans to come to the rescue of their beleaguered allies.

In sum, there seems little hope of increasing force levels in the decades ahead. Yet, in my view, this is the only way to improve significantly NATO's conventional deterrent. It is not surprising, in light of this depressing situation, that

almost all of the proposals to enhance the conventional force posture in Europe focus on either changes in NATO strategy or technological solutions. These panaceas unfortunately hold little promise of improving NATO's prospects of thwarting a Soviet blitzkrieg.

NATO CURRENTLY employs a strategy of forward defense. This calls for placing the majority of its forces along West Germany's eastern border, with the aim of preventing Warsaw Pact units from penetrating into West Germany. Many analysts argue that this is not the optimum strategy for defending against a blitzkrieg and that adopting one of three different strategies would markedly improve NATO's prospects of thwarting a Soviet blitzkrieg. Strategy, in effect, can be used as a cheap force multiplier. The three alternatives under debate are maneuver defense, area defense, and offense.

A maneuver defense calls for placing the majority of NATO forces in large operational reserves deployed in the depths of Germany. A small number of NATO units are deployed in forward positions to serve as a screening force and, in effect, to "escort" the attackers into the heart of Germany, where they are destroyed in large-scale mobile battles by NATO's powerful operational reserves. This defensive strategy is most clearly identified with the self-styled "military reform movement."

Area defense, sometimes referred to as "nonprovocative defense," calls for breaking up NATO's large-scale armored units and dispersing the manpower in small groups armed with precision-guided munitions and heavily supported by "smart" artillery. These very small units are then spread out across a wide belt of West German territory. The objective is to wear down the attacking forces as they attempt to drive through this heavily defended belt. Some variants of this strategy allow for a small number of armored forces, which can be used for limited counterattacks. This defensive strategy is most clearly identified with the German political left, which finds it attractive because it is virtually impossible to launch an offensive with an army comprised essentially of small bands of infantry.

Both of these alternative strategies have significant military drawbacks.<sup>7</sup> There is no need to outline them here, however, because both are unacceptable to the West Germans and therefore are not likely to be adopted. Specifically, successive West German governments have made it unequivocally clear that they will not countenance any strategy that allows the attacking forces to penetrate their territory. Obviously, the Germans want to stop a Warsaw Pact offensive right at their eastern border, and thus remain firmly wedded to forward defense.<sup>8</sup>

The third alternative—adopting an offensive strategy—certainly does not involve giving up German territory, at least in theory. The objective instead is for NATO to launch an attack deep into Eastern bloc territory immediately after the Pact begins its attack, on the theory that the best defense is a good offense. The military utility of this strategy is highly questionable, but again, there is no need to consi-

der it in detail since it is also politically unacceptable to the West Europeans. They are firmly wedded to a defensive posture and categorically reject adopting an offensive strategy, which they see as highly destabilizing. NATO will thus have to make do with its strategy of forward defense.

**T**HERE IS CONSIDERABLE interest in relying on sophisticated new military technologies to shift the conventional balance in NATO's favor. Substituting technology for manpower is a time-honored solution which certainly has a rich tradition in the United States. Certain technologies, which have attracted a great deal of attention, are to be employed as part of a strategy commonly referred to as "deep strike." This strategy calls for NATO to develop and deploy esoteric new weapons which will enable it to strike at the Pact's second-echelon forces, far behind the battle front. Proponents assume that destroying the Pact's second-echelon forces will eliminate a critical element of the attacking force. Specifically, the key to success is to deny the Pact the reinforcements that it will need to exploit its initial victories along the forward edge of the battle area.

For a number of reasons, it is doubtful that the proposed technological solution can shift the balance in NATO's favor or compensate for any future shrinkage in NATO's fighting forces. First, there is the matter of technological feasibility.

Proponents of this option tend to give the impression that the weaponry is effectively "sitting on the shelf," and that NATO only has to find the political will and economic resources to purchase it. In fact, the sophisticated weapons needed to implement a deep-strike strategy have not been developed yet. Moreover, almost all of these new technologies have experienced significant problems in the research and development process, so it is not at all certain that NATO will have the option of procuring this panoply of weapons.

Further, there is the question of how much the deep-strike option will cost. If the past is any guide, this sophisticated weaponry will carry a very expensive price tag. The United States, which is expected to be the principal producer (a point that is likely to cause significant political problems) has been plagued by cost overruns in its weapons acquisition process over the past decade.

Finally, there are reasons to doubt the military utility of a deep-strike approach. First, the Soviets will undoubtedly take measures to counter these new technologies, and the cost-exchange ratios that will attend this mini-arms race may not favor NATO. Second, a careful look at the historical record on deep interdiction reveals that it is a very complex undertaking where the *actual* results are usually not the *predicted* results. As a Rand study notes:



## HE SPEAKS

### "NUKES AND NON-NUKES LISTEN"

Alvin M. Weinberg has been, and still is, a key contributor to nuclear energy. For over forty years he has spoken out on both nuclear theory and practice.

Dr. Weinberg presently is Director of the Institute for Energy Analysis of the Oak Ridge Associated Universities. And Dr. Weinberg is a prolific writer.

The American Nuclear Society has collected in one 214-page volume Weinberg's perceptive and stimulating essays. They are wise, timely, prophetic and date from 1946 through 1985: 1946 Dr. Weinberg accurately forecast the industrial uses of nuclear reactors and radioisotopes; 1971 urged the development of self-contained nuclear energy centers or "nuclear parks". . . .

For years Weinberg has been advocating "professionalization of the nuclear cadre," special training and commitment, technical improvement of reactors, consolidation of the many present nuclear utilities into fewer, large nuclear power companies and location of reactors in relatively isolated sites.

The soft cover volume is available for \$25 plus a \$5.00 handling charge. Master Charge and Visa cards are accepted.

**American Nuclear Society • 555 North Kensington Avenue • La Grange Park, Illinois 60525**



One of the most important conclusions to be drawn from an unbiased examination of interdiction experience is that the outcomes seldom came close to the expectations of the interdiction planners. Even when an interdiction effort has been judged successful, the achievement has not infrequently been quite different from the original objective.<sup>9</sup>

Third, and perhaps most important, there is evidence that the Pact's second-echelon forces would not be very important for effecting a blitzkrieg. A study of successful armored offensives shows that the first-echelon forces conducted both the breakthrough battles and the deep strategic penetration. In the German victory of May 1940, for example, a mass of armored units under General von Kleist made the breakthrough in the Ardennes, and those same forces then immediately drove deep into the Allies' rear to immobilize the French and British forces.<sup>10</sup>

The Germans did not wait for a second echelon to exploit the breakthrough. Such a move would have wasted valuable time, during which the Allies would have shifted forces to cover the hole ripped in their line at Sedan.

If the Soviets are to score a quick and decisive victory in Europe, which will certainly be their objective, it will have to be accomplished by units massed at the breakthrough points. These are the first-echelon forces, and NATO should be primarily concerned with stopping them.

In short, these various panaceas hold little promise for NATO. There is only one way that the Western Allies can markedly improve the conventional balance, and that is by increasing the number of their fighting units. That will not happen, and, in fact, NATO is going to have a very difficult time merely maintaining its present size in the decades ahead.

**A**NOTHER REASON why NATO is not likely to shift the burden of deterrence from nuclear to conventional forces is resistance from the European national security establishments, especially the Germans. European elites have long maintained that the best way to prevent a war in Europe is to insure that Soviet and U.S. decision-makers recognize the strong likelihood that a European conflict will escalate into a general thermonuclear war.

The Europeans fear a situation where the superpowers think it is possible to fight a conventional war or a limited nuclear war in Europe. Deterrence, they maintain, would then be greatly weakened because the superpowers could engage in a conflict that would spare their homelands. This is why the Europeans were so adamantly opposed, in the early 1960s, to abandoning massive retaliation and adopting flexible response. Thus the Europeans have a long-standing interest in "coupling" the U.S. nuclear deterrent to the defense of Europe.

The matter of coupling is especially vital to the Germans, whose territory will be the battleground in a European conflict and who have no nuclear weapons of their own that can serve as a deterrent. Instead, they rely on the U.S. "nuclear umbrella." Conventional deterrence is invariably seen by the Germans as a codeword for decoupling the U.S.

nuclear deterrent from the defense of their homeland. They would undoubtedly accept some enhancement of conventional NATO forces, if it could be done at a reasonable price. But it is very unlikely that they would support an effort to improve markedly the conventional posture, simply because this would be seen as leading to decoupling. Other Europeans, as well as many Americans, would also resist a large buildup of conventional forces.

One might argue that since the uproar over the 1979 NATO decision to deploy Pershing II and cruise missiles in Europe, traditional European thinking about the great deterrent value of nuclear weapons is undergoing a radical transformation. The result would be European, and particularly German, willingness to do as much as possible to excise nuclear weapons from the deterrence equation.

This should mean that there will be support in Europe for conventional deterrence, but this is not a likely scenario. Although there is much unhappiness with NATO's deterrent posture, there does not appear to be enough dissatisfaction to overturn the status quo. Moreover, the status quo has many defenders, whose momentary silence should not be allowed to obscure their formidable political power. Finally, a move away from reliance on nuclear weapons will require NATO to strengthen its conventional forces so that they will be better able to assume their increased responsibilities. As previously emphasized, there appears to be no feasible way of accomplishing this goal.

It is difficult to see how NATO will be able to decrease its reliance on nuclear weapons in the remaining years of the twentieth century. In fact, if one accepts the purport of this analysis, it is likely that NATO will have to rely more heavily on nuclear deterrence in the years ahead. □

1. John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Soviets Can't Win Quickly in Central Europe," *International Security* (Summer 1982), pp. 3-39; Barry R. Posen, "Measuring the Conventional Balance: Coping with Complexity in Threat Assessment," *International Security* (Winter 1984-1985), pp. 47-88.

2. For a more extensive discussion of conventional deterrence, see John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), esp. chapter 2.

3. *Ibid.*, chapters 4-5.

4. See works cited in note 1.

5. Gilbert Kutscher, "The Impact of Population Development on Military Manpower Problems: An International Comparison," *Armed Forces and Society* (Winter 1983), pp. 265-73. The Soviet Union and especially the East Germans also face demographic problems, but the Poles and the Czechs do not.

6. Commission on Long-Term Planning for the Federal Armed Forces, *Final Report* (Bonn: Federal Minister of Defense, June 21, 1982).

7. John J. Mearsheimer, "Maneuver, Mobile Defense and the NATO Central Front," *International Security* (Winter 1981-1982), pp. 104-22; Hew Strachan, "Conventional Defense in Europe," *International Affairs* (Winter 1984-1985), pp. 27-43. The latter article contains an excellent critique of area defense.

8. For a good example of West Germany's deep attachment to forward defense, see *White Paper 1983: The Security of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Development of the Federal Armed Forces* (Bonn: Federal Minister of Defense, 1983), esp. pp. 142-45, 158-62.

9. Edmund Dews and Felix Kozaczka, *Air Interdiction: Lessons from Past Campaigns*, Rand Note N-1743-PA and E (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, Sept. 1981).

10. See Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, "Dunkirk 1940," trans. Edward Fitzgerald, in H.A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer, eds., *Decisive Battles of World War II* (New York: Putnam, 1965), pp. 29-68.