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THE CONVENTIONAL MILITARY BALANCE IN EUROPE

by Roger Hill

INTRODUCTION

In the last two years, the world seems to have crossed a divide into a more optimistic state. At the Reykjavik Summit on 11 and 12 October 1986, President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev unveiled new vistas for cuts in nuclear armaments, and paved the way for the agreement on the elimination of intermediate-range nuclear weapons signed in Washington on 8 December 1987. They also gave an impetus to the efforts to establish a new treaty on long-range, strategic nuclear weapons, which could, before long, require fifty percent cuts by the two superpowers. Other agreements on such issues as the reduction and control of battlefield nuclear weapons and chemical weapons could also follow in the next few years if East-West relations continue to improve and the momentum of the disarmament effort is kept up.

That is why there is a new interest in the conventional military balance in Europe. The two sides will have to rely more heavily on their conventional forces if they are to give up more and more of their nuclear weapons; and they will want to be sure that those conventional forces are strong enough to deter aggression or to defeat an enemy if an attack does come. Many West Europeans, for example, believe that there should be no reductions in NATO's battlefield nuclear weapons until they can be assured that a satisfactory conventional balance exists.

This immediately raises the problem of deciding what is an adequate conventional balance. Some people believe that NATO and the Warsaw Pact have already achieved balance at the conventional level, or at least that each side has enough conventional forces to deny the other the assurance of victory if it launched an attack. But others argue that their side is outnumbered in one way or another. Many in the West believe that the Warsaw Pact has a marked superiority in manpower, tanks, artillery and overall strength near the

front line in Germany, whereas Soviet and other Eastern spokesmen often claim that NATO has an advantage in such weapons as tactical aircraft.

The state of the conventional military balance in Europe is certainly a complex question. To tackle it seriously means deciding which areas of Europe to examine, which countries are involved, which of their military forces are relevant, what equipment and manpower they have, how good they are, and when they might be committed to action. Even then the results that emerge will be only a rough guide, not an indication of how a battle might actually develop if a war did break out. They will not measure such qualities as generalship or morale, which can often be decisive in wartime.

GEOGRAPHIC ZONES

The first point to decide is which part of Europe is most important when it comes to counting the balance of conventional military forces between East and West. Most assessments begin by examining the numbers of divisions confronting each other on the *Central Front*, that is to say the border area between East and West which runs for about 750 kilometres from the Baltic Sea down through the middle of Germany and then along the German-Czechoslovak frontier to Austria. The most powerful armies of NATO and the Warsaw Pact face each other across this border, and so a good deal of attention is paid to the numbers of troops, tanks, artillery and other equipment in this zone.

However, counting the front line forces is not enough. In a crisis or during wartime they would be reinforced by other NATO and Warsaw Pact forces from rear areas. These would be drawn first from the territories of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg on the Western side, and from those of the German Democratic Republic, Poland and Czechoslovakia on the Eastern side. This region is so important that it was

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