The table illustrates the superiority of the West's potential manpower and economic resources compared with those of the Warsaw Pact nations. From this, it is usually concluded that NATO would have greater staying power than the Warsaw Pact in a protracted conventional war. The weight of resources favouring the West should guarantee ultimate victory over the long-term.

Different conclusions are drawn by those studying the balance of actual military power. Focusing on military potential, it is argued, ignores the balance of existing military forces. The long war cannot be won if the short war is lost. The resource superiority of the Western alliance matters little if the opening battles of the conflict are lost. In the short-term, the outcome on the battlefield will be decided by the active and reserve forces currently fielded by each alliance.

Concern with the short-term outcome of an East-West confrontation prompts analysis of the conventional military balance at the theatre level, in particular along the Central Front in Europe. The Central Front runs along the inter-German border from the Elbe River in Lower Saxony to the south-western tip of the Czechoslovakian border, a distance of 725 km. (The West German state of Schleswig-Holstein north of the Elbe River comes under the operational command of NATO's Northern Region.) Seven countries contribute forces to the defence of the border, and these forces are arrayed in "layer-cake" fashion along the length of the Front.

The Northern Army Group (NORTHAG), consisting of Dutch, German, British, and Belgian corps, defends the northern section of the Front from the Elbe to the Harz Mountains, a distance of 225 km. The remaining 500 km are the