Restoring NATO’s Flexible Response

The Alliance must have stronger conventional forces to raise the nuclear threshold, but this will not eliminate the need for a nuclear deterrent in Europe.

By John T. Correll, Senior Editor

NATO’s strategy of Flexible Response is no longer as flexible as it used to be. Over the past decade, the conventional military balance in Europe has tipped in favor of the Warsaw Pact. There is real concern that NATO would have to resort to the use of nuclear weapons early in the event of any conflict, or else risk being overrun.

“There is an urgent need to raise the nuclear threshold to lessen our dependence on early use of nuclear weapons,” says West German General Franz-Joseph Schulze, Commander in Chief of Allied Forces Central Europe from 1977 to 1979. General Schulze remains active in Alliance matters, and his counsel is highly respected by political leaders and defense planner on both sides of the Atlantic.

“The nuclear threshold is not a function, as some people seem to believe, of the availability and usability of any nuclear weapon,” General Schulze says. “It is a function, first and foremost, of the conventional capability. Neither an aggressor nor a defender is going to use nuclear weapons if he can achieve his aims by conventional forces alone.”

While NATO must give high priority to improving its conventional posture – and must develop a capability to extend the battlefield into enemy territory – that alone is not adequate for the defense of Europe, he says.

“Improved conventional forces can never be an alternate for nuclear forces,” General Schulze says. “Our deterrence depends on the close and indivisible linkage of conventional forces, nuclear forces on European soil, and American strategic nuclear forces.”

No-First-Use Proposals

General Schulze has been an outspoken critic of proposals that NATO pledge no first use of nuclear weapons in a European war. The Alliance has, of course, already renounced the first use of any weapon, but keeps open the option of escalation to nuclear weapons as a final measure to defeat a large-scale attack should the other side start a war. That is the gist of the Flexible Response strategy adopted by NATO in 1967. In addition, the United States extends the “nuclear umbrella” of its strategic forces to the protection of Europe.

“By forgoing the option of first use of nuclear weapons, we would lessen the linkage between the defense capability in Europe and the strategic arsenal in the United States.” General Schulze says. “And the would be the end of our deterrence.”

The issue goes well beyond comparative conventional force levels, in which NATO is at a disadvantage.
“The main point is that the Soviets would be liberated from any existential risks for their own country, and that makes the conventional war more calculable for them,” General Schulze says. “The same applies to the United States. Even if they would still share the risks and burdens of the conventional defense of Europe, the American homeland would be relieved of the decisive nuclear risk. What binds NATO together is the greatest possible realization of the principle of equal risks, equal burdens, and equal security.”

Without the presence of NATO nuclear weapons, the Warsaw Pact would be freer to mass its forces instead of dispersing them. Countering this would require a NATO conventional force of a size the member nations are unlikely to fund and field. The elimination of risk to the existence of the homelands of the superpowers, General Schulze says, makes conventional war in Europe once again possible. That, in turn, makes the overall probability of nuclear war higher than it is now because of the likelihood of escalation in any armed conflict involving the superpowers.

“The key to preventing the use of nuclear weapons is to deter conflict between the East and the West at any level,” Gen. David C. Jones, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last year “The critical threshold is the beginning of combat.”

The value of an improved NATO conventional capability and the inherent raising of the nuclear threshold, General Schulze believes, is that it will restore the credibility of the Flexible Response strategy.

Dual Track
The nuclear balance in Europe, already unfavorable to the West, is constantly deteriorating as the Russians field triple-warhead SS-20 medium-range missiles at the rate of one a week. The Soviets decided to develop the SS-20 in the early 1970’s, when the diplomacy of détente was supposedly in full sway, and began deploying it in 1976. They now have more than 300 of these missiles with more than 900 warheads, two-thirds of them targeted against NATO, with enough range to cover the entire European theater.

NATO has no medium-range nuclear weapons at all, and in face has reduced the number of its shorter-range nuclear system. In 1979, Alliance ministers agreed to pursue a “dual-track” initiative: unless the Soviets agreed to reductions in intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), NATO would deploy 108 Pershing IIs and 464 ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) in Europe, beginning in December 1983. Both Pershing II and GLCM are single-warhead systems.

INF talks between the United States and the Soviet Union began in 1981. At that time, President Reagan proposed that both the US and the USSR forgo medium-range nuclear missiles worldwide. The Soviets turned down this “zero-zero” solution. Last year, NATO reaffirmed its dual-track policy decision.

With the date for NATO deployments approaching, the Soviets stepped up their propaganda barrage. Secretary General Yuri Andropov offered to reduce SS-20s in Europe to 162, a number equal to French and British strategic nuclear systems. It was not clear, however, whether he was offering to destroy those missiles or merely to pull them back beyond the Urals, available for redeployment against Europe at some later time. Either way, the remaining SS-20s east of the Urals threaten US interests and allies in the Pacific. The United States refused the Proposal.

“Nor is it quite clear whether Andropov meant 162 launchers or 162 warheads,” General Schulze points out. Each SS-20 carries three warheads.

The French and British nuclear weapons are assets of those nations, and are not controlled by the United States. They are not committed to use by the Alliance as a whole. Neither France
nor Britain is agreeable to their last lines of national defense becoming bargaining chips in bilateral US-USSR negotiations.

A day before the NATO Defense Ministers' conference last winter, the Russians announced they would consider a launch-on-warning strategy if NATO deploys Pershing II and GLCM.

**Propaganda and Confidence**

Meanwhile, the Soviet propaganda blitz has been scoring heavily with scared citizens in the West. A powerful antinuclear movement has been gathering steam in Europe and threatens to block deployment of the NATO missiles, regardless of what happens in the INF talks and no matter how many SS-20s the Soviets choose to field.

“We have to proceed with the Pershing II and the GLCM,” General Schulze says. “We can hope for arms reductions only if the Russians see that we are definitely determined to install these weapons. The double-track decision was an innovative approach to arms control. We clearly stated that in four years time, we would begin with the implementation. We gave the Russians four years to think about it. What leads us to hope that they would be more forthcoming in the fifth year or in the sixth year unless they are convinced we will go ahead with it?”

The USSR, which had previously resisted entry into INF negotiations, came to the bargaining table within two years of NATO’s double-track decision. “We wouldn't have negotiations in Geneva without that double-track decision in 1979,” General Schulze says. “And we won't have reductions in nuclear weaponry unless we stand firm.”

What the Russians are really after is decoupling of the United States from the defense of Europe, General Schulze says. If the USSR can engineer such a split and then intimidate Europe with its military superiority, the Soviets will have achieved their objective without firing a shot.

“The Soviets want to avoid war,” General Schulze says. “They believe in what the Chinese philosopher and strategist Sun Tze put so well in the sixth century before Christ. The great strategist is not the one who wins one battle after another. The great strategist is the one who wins the war without having to fight any battle.”

“The danger is that the erosion of the confidence of our people and the feeling of inferiority may lead to an attitude of accommodation and appeasement with the Russians. That is what the Soviets are really up to and what their force buildup really means.”

The Russians have always been skilful in exploiting their military might for political purposes. Their propaganda has been successful largely because the way for it was paved with superior power, General Schulze believes. The solution, then, may be an improved NATO military posture, against which the Soviets will loom less large.

“The American in their history have never experienced such a situation, where they had to preserve their free society and to protect themselves from political pressure of a superior neighbor,” General Schulze says. “We have different historical experiences, and that makes the transatlantic dialogue sometimes more difficult. The European history is full of precedents where small countries had to have in to political blackmail and try to accommodate.”

“We already see that weakening in the attitude of European populations and European politicians. A feeling that you shouldn't provoke the Russian bear. Some of the war-fighting rhetoric we have heard from your side of the Atlantic adds to feeling of vulnerability of the Europeans. The real problem is the erosion of confidence of our people. We must upgrade our conventional and nuclear capabilities and, thus, give a new reassurance to our population. We have to better
understand the real nature of the threat and keep in mind that our main aim must be restoring the confidence in our ability to deter and defend.”

Extending the Conventional Battlefield
The prospect for improved NATO nuclear capability – or else redress of the nuclear balance in Europe through arms control – lies with the INF talks and with the double-track policy.

The approach to improving conventional forces is less focused. “Currently, we must measure our ability to sustain combat in Europe in days, whereas we estimate the Warsaw Pact’s sustainability in weeks or months,” Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, wrote last summer in a Foreign Affairs article. In its conventional forces, NATO is left with what General Rogers calls a “delayed tripwire” that would trigger early use of nuclear weapons unless the Alliance chose to accept defeat.

The Soviets and the Pact are well ahead in conventional numbers, and they long ago moved out of the “cheap junk” category with their equipment. It is axiomatic that stronger force is required to attack than to defend. This is some advantage to NATO, being a defensive alliance, but it is offset by requirements for a forward defense. The traditional option in warfare of falling back to trade space for time is not available, be cause that would mean sacrifice of West German’s territory.

Within the NATO strategy of Forward Defense, however, new options are being explored for extending the battlefield in the other direction – not only blunting the enemy’s first wave at the point of attack, but also going after his airfields and rear echelons as well. (Elsewhere is this issue, a leading US military analyst, Col. Trevor N. Dupuy, USA [Ret.], takes exception to current emphasis on this approach. See p.80.)

Interdiction is a standard Air Force mission, but in actual wartime it has mostly concentrated on such targets as enemy bridges, depots, and supply lines. By the 1970s, new sensors and smart weapons had led to other possibilities. In his classical “Tactical Counterforce” article (Air Force Magazine, June 1974). Maj. Gen. Leslie W. Bray, Jr., described the emerging concept of using airpower to attack mobile Warsaw Pact armor before it could close with NATO ground forces.

“Since we don’t have enough forces for major counter-attacks, we just have to extend the fire into enemy territory,” General Schulze says. “We cannot put ourselves into a position where the victims of aggression bear all the devastation and destruction of war. We cannot win without a great degradation of Soviet tactical airpower. And we cannot win if we are not going for the follow-on formations.”

Soviet doctrine would point toward successive echelons of armor and mobile forces attempting to blast through several broad invasion corridors with the aim of quick victory. Operational Maneuver Groups of armor would probably seek to disrupt the NATO rear. The Pact would likely put 2,000 aircraft into the attack, penetrators coming in low with electronic jamming and combat air patrol protection. Allied air bases, nuclear capabilities, and command control and communications centers would be high-priority targets for Pact airpower. The Soviets might or might not refrain from early use of chemical weapons – in which they have a decisive advantage – because it could be seen as an escalation from conventional capability and thus elicit a nuclear response.

“The enemy can bring in fresh forces when the first attacking formations have been attrited,” General Schulze says. “The force ratio will constantly be shifting to our disadvantage, so we cannot focus improvement of our conventional defenses totally on how to counter the first attacking formation. We must make sure that the follow-on formations will be delayed, disrupted, and attrited before they enter the close-in battle.”
He says that improvements must come in stages, geared partly to what new technologies might offer over the next decade.

“But if we want to improve our capability as quickly as possible, then we have to use what is available,” he says. “There is a great opportunity to convert moving targets into stationary targets. In this context, field fortifications and antitank ditches seem to gain a new fascination for some people. However, we have the most effective antitank ditches provided by nature – the river Elbe, the Saale, and the Moldau. We know where these rivers can be crossed, where they can be bridged or forded. These crossing sites are fixed targets. We have to keep this interdiction line under close surveillance to deny the crossing of the rivers as soon as it starts, and let the moving formations bump up behind the crossing sites. There we will find the richest targets of the war worth taking the risk to use manned aircraft.”

General Schulze does not, however, think manned aircraft are the answer for all rear echelon targets.

“The best way of degrading enemy airpower is to attack them on their bases, and we have to do that from the outset of hostilities,” he says. “We have to force them to go to dispersal operating bases, which are less protected, and where dispersal alone would degrade their sortie rates.

“We get the best results if we are able to attack their main operating bases while the first wave of attacking aircraft is still in the air, so it has to be diverted. That requires weapon systems with very short reaction time. Furthermore, going after main operating bases by manned aircraft will be a very costly affair – very high attrition rates. We need to develop the capability of attacking the main operating bases by missiles – ballistic missiles, in fact – and then use our air forces to attack the dispersal operating bases where the enemy air is so much more vulnerable.”

He acknowledges that such ideas generate roles-and-missions controversy, but says that vital capabilities may not be developed “if we continue to think in ‘successor’ terms. By that, I mean having a new tank for every outgoing tank, having a new aircraft for every outdated aircraft, and so on. There has to be some rearrangement in that thinking.”

General Schulze favors use of drones for target acquisition, which he says is one of NATO’s greatest weaknesses at present. He supports the ongoing development of such target acquisition systems as the Pave Mover radar, but says that RPVs with a real-time capability to downlink target data offer a simpler more economical way to direct firepower.

He has also been critical of Alliance munitions, saying that NATO has modern airplanes but loads them with iron bombs.

“We have the most sophisticated aircraft and we are still loading them with iron bombs,” he says. “We need is the capability to lay down a huge amount of fire on chokepoints. We need conventional weapons of mass destruction. I’m speaking about a whole series of submunitions being developed for such purposes. The principle must be that if you have masses of armor, you should kill that armor by a weapon system which has a mass effect and not an effect only against a single tank.”

**Command and Control**

General Schulze applauds deployment by the Alliance of the E-3A AWACS but questions whether NATO is fully exploiting its potential.

“There is still too much stress on the early warning capability,” he says. “I don’t want to denigrate that, but AWACS can do much more than provide additional warning time. AWACS
could be an excellent means for command control of our air defenses. We need to pass target
data in real time to fire unites. If we increase our battle management, we can better exploit the
available firepower.”

For years, critics have pointed to NATO’s lack of standardization and to its interoperability
shortcomings, particularly in command control and communications.

“I believe that our failure to achieve interoperability in the field of command and control would
have much more disastrous results than all of our previous sins against standardization of
equipment,” General Schulze says. “We have done quite well in the Central Region as to the
command and control of our air forces.

“The situation is much worse as far as the land forces are concerned. If we don’t solve that
problem, I sometimes fear that the land battle in the Central Region could fall apart into the more
or less independent battles of eight different corps, or ten if the American reinforcements arrive,
or twelve if the French participate.”

**The Elements of Deterrence**

Armed attack on Western Europe remains highly improbable, but is not inconceivable, especially
should the Soviets conclude that the Alliance had split, was too weak, or was unwilling to resist
by either conventional or nuclear means. More likely is that the Soviet Union will further attempt
to exploit fear of its military superiority for political advantage.

“We cannot counter Russia’s military power and the element of fear by military means alone,”
General Schulze says. “We must have a cohesive, overall policy – encompassing military
security, economic issues, psychological issues, and political issues.

“Deterrence is not the sum of weapon systems, formations, and military capabilities. It is first
and foremost a function of the political cohesion of the Alliance and of our resolve.”

“If we are lacking in that, our deterrent capability is degraded without anything having changed
within our forces.” – End