Strategy for Victory or Defeat?

A leading military analyst says the new concept of overemphasis on attacking the enemy’s rear areas is wrong.

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been a functioning military alliance for more than thirty-two years. In those three decades NATO has had its share of strategic and doctrinal controversies.

First there was the debate about “filling the gap” between what SHAPE planners thought was an appropriate force level for the defense of Western Europe and the much smaller forces that the NATO countries seemed willing to provide. Then, when it became obvious that the “gap” would not be filled, came the question of whether the Warsaw Pact could be deterred if SHAPE adapted the unambiguous strategy of meeting any attack from the East with tactical nuclear weapons. This strategy, of course, became unconvincing when the USSR overcame American’s early lead in both tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and strategic nuclear weapons poised to devastate the hostile homeland.

In recent years the debates have focused on the military logic and viability – should a war break out – of the so-called “Forward Defense” strategy in combination with another strategy called “Flexible Response.” These debates took place in the context of the fairly self-evident fact that the Warsaw Pact had not only overcome its tactical nuclear inferiority, but had maintained, and was perhaps widening, the same old “gap” in conventional forces.

A relatively recent, widely read fictionalized forecast of such a war, The Third World War: August 1985, by General Sir John Hackett and some other eminent military specialists, suggested that NATO probably could win such a war – but only if it had about five years to devote intensive efforts to the adoption of a number of measures to improve the forces and their readiness, and to improve overall political, strategic, and tactical coordination among the governments and forces of the NATO allies. In the two years since the publication of that book it has become evident that the NATO governments are not only still failing to close the “gap,” they are not initiating the measures that General Hackett and his colleagues thought essential if NATO were to have a chance to defeat a Warsaw Pact attack on the West.

New Concept Emerges
By now, however, a new strategy has emerged – although some claim it is merely a new emphasis on existing strategy. With considerable fanfare we are told that through modern technology – where the West has a great lead over the USSR and its allies – we can stop a Warsaw Pact offensive at the frontiers and carry the war back into Eastern Europe. We can do this, we are told, by attacking the rear areas of the Warsaw Pact forces with a number of new, remarkable, long-range, highly accurate weapons, thus preventing the Soviets and East Europeans from reinforcing, supplying, or controlling the first wave – or echelon – of attacking forces. As a result, the Warsaw Pact’s first echelon will run out of steam, be halted, and then be
thrown back before it has had a chance to penetrate the Forward Defense forces holding the frontiers.

Before examining the rear area attack strategy, it will be helpful to set the stage by reviewing quickly some significant background facts, including the essential nature of the component Forward Defense.

The Forward Defense (sometimes called Forward Strategy) is based on three important arguments, one political, two military.

The political argument is that the West German government cannot subscribe to any strategy that would sacrifice any portion of West Germany in the traditional defensive process of trading space for time, or space for military advantage. This political argument is reinforced by the military argument that the distance between the West German frontiers with East Germany and the Rhine River (for German’s western borders) is too short to permit the traditional military defensive maneuvers of defense in depth.

The second military argument is that such maneuvers are no longer necessary since armored forces, because of their relative invulnerability to hostile firepower, can carry out an “active defense” by shifting forces rapidly under fire in such a way that reserves in depth are no longer needed. Furthermore, because of the Warsaw Pact’s numerical superiority, NATO can’t afford the luxury of holding out reserves from the front line. So this second military argument provides some justification for not trying to increase NATO’s conventional force strength.

Criticisms of Forward Strategy
These arguments have been attacked by some people, including this writer, as being unrealistic. The Forward Strategy is merely a modern version of what military men call a “linear defense” or “cordon defense.” Such a defense has always been vulnerable to any reasonable and determined offensive strategy, which will always be able to punch a hole someplace in any defensive line. This is particularly true if the defensive line has neither fortifications to stiffen the surface of the defense nor reserves to move up to block the inevitable breakthrough. Fortifications would permit economies in the front-line troops, thus permitting the deployment of reserves in the rear.

Critics of Forward Defense assert that the depth of West Germany is adequate for a defense in depth and that politicians – particularly the West Germans – must realize that the issue is not one of holding as much of Germany as possible, but is rather a choice between holding as much as possible with a flexible military strategy or holding it with a flexible military strategy or holding it with a brittle strategy that will lose all of West Germany once the Cordon defense is broken.

There have been other critics of NATO strategy – a group who call themselves “reformers” – who are less concerned about a fortified surface or the depth of defenses than they are about their perception of a NATO overemphasis on defeating the Warsaw Pact by attrition through firepower rather than by skill, flexibility, and maneuver. The only problem about the reformers’ arguments is that they insist that “maneuver warfare” is cheaper than “attrition warfare,” and that if the plodding military planners and leaders would only think imaginatively and flexibly they could defeat the East European hordes easily, and without heavy loss of life. Unfortunately, history has proved that such ideas of “war on the cheap” – even when offered by the reformers’ own oracle, the late Sir Basil Liddell Hart – have always been doomed to bloody failure.

In recent years the US Army has been reconsidering its 1970s’ doctrine of essentially linear defense (to which it had been almost ineluctably drawn by the political requirements of NATO). The result of this reevaluation has been a greater emphasis on tactical maneuver – offensive as well as defensive – and flexibility. This new doctrine, while not abandoning the active defense
concept completely, at least pays lip service to the requirement for some depth in defense (to be provided by reserves). It has also focused on the fact that improved coordination between air and ground forces should permit deepening the battlefield in the other direction as well: into the enemy’s rear areas.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, artillery has been used by defending forces to reduce the power of the offense by hitting at command posts, at reserves, at artillery supporting the attack, and at supply lines. But, though airpower was used for interdiction purposes even as early as World War I, the coordination of airpower and ground forces in deepening the depth of the combat zone has not kept pace with the advances of modern weapons technology. And the traditional Soviet doctrine of attacking in waves, or echelons, offers a particularly important reason for relating the struggle at the front lines to long-range attacks to hold off the new waves of the Warsaw Pact hordes approaching the frontline struggle.

The Air Force and the Army have just agreed on a new operational concept called “Joint Attack of the Second Echelon.” In fact, however, this new concept is not as new as it might seem; it is merely adapting combat-proven concepts of ground and air-ground warfare to the increasing ranges and capabilities of surface-to-surface weapons (mostly missiles, with precision-guidance) and air-delivered weapons (bombs, missiles, and improved ballistic weapons). Most of the earlier critics – again including this author – applaud the new emphasis on maneuver, on flexibility, and on improved coordination of weapons in offensive-defensive tactics, which avoids, and to some extent answers, the unrealistic concepts of the reformers.

**Essence of the Concept**
This, then, is the background of the rear area attack concept. What is its essence?

From what we read in unclassified literature, that concept has the following characteristics:

- With the possible modification of permitting a bit more depth in reserves, the Forward Defense is basic to the new NATO strategy.

- NATO ground forces, in their forward positions, will be able to halt the Warsaw Pact’s first echelon at the border (because the battlefield has been deepened on the enemy side).

- Simultaneously, long-range surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs), in coordination with NATO tactical air forces – both employing new, and improved, and precision-guided conventional munitions – will be used against vulnerable Soviet rear area chokepoints, lines of communications, command posts, and particularly advancing second- and third-echelon forces coming up to support and pass through the first echelon.

- These accurate, long-range attacks will defeat the Warsaw Pact on its own territory; the first echelon, deprived of reinforcements, of coherent direction, and of supplies, will be thrown back across the Iron Curtain.

- Through this strategy of coordinated and imaginative use of modern technology in weapons and warheads, we shall be able to defeat the Warsaw Pact without any need to increase our present force levels, and without having to resort to tactical nuclear weapons. Thus, as long as we maintain a nuclear deterrent capability (which is, we are told, in fact enhanced by this new doctrine), we shall no longer have to worry about having to match Soviet conventional forces.

Let’s analyze this concept, first to see what is strong and positive about it, and then to see if there are any offsetting weaknesses.
On the positive side, we see for the first time a truly coordinated international and interservice effort to take advantage of the opportunities that modern technology gives us to integrate, on the battlefield, the combat means available to us.

There are a lot of vulnerabilities in the Soviet and Warsaw Pact military systems and operational concepts. We certainly should do everything we can to exploit those vulnerabilities, and to take advantage of the weaknesses, as is contemplated in the rear area attack concept.

At the outset of a NATO-Warsaw Pact war, the other side will certainly have the initiative, which carries with it some substantial advantages. Anything we can do to slow the momentum of the attacking forces and to interfere with their command systems, their means of control, and their logistic support should be done, and should contribute to our chances of success.

Obviously it is important to limit the effectiveness of their long-range capabilities to do damage to us and to our basic defensive capability.

Any capability that we have, any advantage that we enjoy should be exploited to the utmost of our ability recognizing that there will always be competing requirements for our resources.

**What of the Enemy?**

So it seems that by this new concept we have solved the problem of dealing with the Soviet menace!

Or have we? Before we can answer that question, let's look further at the nature of that menace and at the strategy, tactics, and doctrine of the potential foe: The Soviet armed forces and their Warsaw Pact allies.

From time to time we need to remind ourselves that the Soviet armed forces today are the direct descendants of the Red Army of World War II. That Red Army was far less efficient and less technologically developed than the German Army to which it was opposed. Yet it won the war, by a combination of grim determination and concentration of overwhelming strength against the out-numbered German. Nevertheless, its inefficiencies were very evident to the leaders of the Red Army, and they and their successors have devoted much historical study to that war, combined with modern research and analysis for the purpose of overcoming those deficiencies, and keeping abreast of modern military technology.

It is true that in World War II the Soviets had a doctrine of deploying forces in echelon, to which they adhered rather faithfully, although they did modify that doctrine when circumstances demanded different deployments. It is equally true that the Soviets have adapted that two-echelon (and sometimes three-echelon) concept to new weapons and circumstances. But they have done so quite flexibly, and there is reason to believe they will not employ the concept as rigidly as they did in World War II, and may not employ it at all except where fronts are too narrow for them to mass their forces effectively in any other manner. In this case they will, of course, old out substantial reserves.

Whether the Soviets use echelons or employ reserves, they will do so at all levels, through army group (or front) and theater. The rear area attack concept appears to be related to echelonment at the army group level; in other words, with respect to the reserve or second-echelon armies within the attacking army groups, some fifty to ninety kilometers behind the leading elements of the front-line armies. And obviously the concept is related to subsequent waves or echelons of armies in the second echelon army groups, or theater reserves, 150 kilometers and more behind the front.
The Soviet Army today has probably inherited some of the old rigidity of the Red Army, but it is led by professionals who have studied their profession perhaps more diligently than the average officer in NATO forces. And they are not more stupid, nor less determined, than their fathers who beat the Germans. Let us not forget that these were the people who were defeated by a technologically superior army in 1941, but who nevertheless won a Moscow, Stalingrad, Kursk, and Berlin.

This summary survey of how the Soviet armed forces today have developed from the Red Army of 1945 has a direct bearing on a critical examination of the rear area attack concept.

**Shortcomings of Rear Area Attack**

Now for the evident shortcomings of that concept. First and foremost, it is based on several arrogant and extremely dubious assumptions with respect to the Soviet armed forces.

We are assuming that our weapons will be much more advanced than theirs. Despite our vaunted technological lead (which is unquestionable, but not dramatic, as the history of space exploration demonstrates), the Soviets have usually been ahead of us in the military application of modern technology. Maybe they have stolen most of the ideas from us, but they have almost invariably been able to convert the ideas into large numbers of effective weapons in the hands of troops before we have been able to do so. There is no reason to believe this will change in the future. Our weapons will probably usually be marginally better than theirs, but theirs will be in greater numbers, probably simpler, probably highly effective.

We are assuming that they will go to war under circumstances in which we can employ our doctrine and weapons effectively, while they cannot so employ theirs. I am convinced, however, that they will not go to war except in circumstances where they will be able to achieve some sort of surprise, and with deployments and objectives designed to avoid making themselves vulnerable to our doctrines and capabilities.

We are assuming that we will have nearly total air superiority. Otherwise we will not be able to carry out superiority. Otherwise we will not be able to carry out those aspects of the rear echelon attacks to be performed by aircraft – whether reconnaissance, acquisition, or attack – nor will we be in a position to use our SSMs effectively, if indeed a significant portion can survive in a hostile air-superiority environment.

And we are assuming that, if we are able to carry out those long-range attacks essentially as planned, they will have a really decisive effect on the capability of the Warsaw Pact to provide support, supplies, and reinforcements to its first echelon forces engaged along our front. Even if there were some certainty with regard to all of the previous assumptions, this one is even more dubious. All previous versions off attacks into an enemy's rear area – whether by long-range artillery or by some version of long-range penetration – have historically had only limited success. These historical examples should encourage us to believe that we can cause some damage, and add considerably to the enemy's problems, but should also make it clear that the contribution of overall battle success has been, and is likely to be, marginal at best.

Above all, we are assuming that our foes are stupid, and we are smart; that they will be rigid, and we shall be flexible; that we know all about how to take advantage of their doctrine, but that they will be unable to take advantage of ours.

In other words, we are deluding ourselves.

**First Things First**

Part of that delusion affects our ability to do the damage in the enemy's rear areas that we tell ourselves we can do. We do not yet have the means to acquire and hit targets deep in the
enemy rear effectively. And, if by very expensive research and development – to the neglect of other development – we do create the assuredly very costly means to hit these targets, we have no assurance that the enemy will not, in the meantime, develop equally effective means to hamper or interfere with our new long-range gadgetry. And simultaneously develop the means to play equal hob in our own rear areas.

In more specific terms, we are assuming that is we devote a substantial proportion of our relatively meager military resources to dealing with the Soviets’ second echelon, and with their rear area system of reinforcement, control, and re-supply, we don’t need to worry about a Soviet breakthrough of our vulnerable cordon defense. Since these targets in the enemy rear are undeniably valuable targets, what does it matter if we are not so effective as we might be? We are still doing some good by inflicting damage on the enemy. The only thing is that by such a conversion of peacetime efforts to developing the means to carry out our new concept, and by employing a substantial proportion of our outnumbered battlefield resources for this purpose, we are diverting resources from the already all-too-thin force capability to hold the line.

Unless our long-range attack capability should be more certain and more effective than we have any right to hope, the Soviets are likely still to be able to muster a powerful first-echelon effort against us, and to sustain and maintain that effort. This means that they are likely to break through our brittle Forward Defense; probably more likely than they are now. And without substantial reserves in depth, one breakthrough will probably mean that we shall have lost the war.

In other words, we are likely to lose the war quickly because we have tried to win it quickly, in defiance of fundamental principles and verities of war throughout history. I am convinced that, to a greater extent than ever before in NATO’s thirty-two year history, this is a strategy for defeat.

Before we can afford the luxury of trying to win the war quickly, we need to put first things first. We need to be sure that we won’t lose the war before we can win it. There is no sense in trying to defeat the second echelon on enemy territory if the first echelon can defeat us on ours.

The new concept is self-defeating in at least two other ways.

First, if the Soviets read it in anything like the way I do, and if they respond to it in the way that would seem to make the most military sense and logic, it should increase their confidence in victory. Thus we are destabilizing the situation, and encouraging Soviet adventurism.

But it is destabilizing in another, very serious, fashion, although perhaps no more so than with any other successful NATO defense. If the rear area attack concept should prove to be at all effective, it would put for the Soviets, a premium on moving to tactical nuclear preemption. They are not going to embark on such a war unless they are determined to win. If their timetable is slowed down by conventional weapons that are much more effective than conventional weapons of the past and that approach nuclear weapons in their lethality (which is one of the arguments in favor of the potential effectiveness of rear area attack), then the line between conventional war and nuclear war has been blurred. This automatically lowers the nuclear threshold, and gives them added incentive to start using tactical nuclear weapons. And if they do, it will be a massive use, which should assure a breakthrough of the brittle Forward Defense strategy.

What, then, should we do about the situation?

Whatever we do, it has to be something that we know is reasonable and acceptable to the NATO countries. Since they have not yet been frightened enough to raise either their force levels or their expenditure levels to any great degree, these realities must be recognized. Here, however, are some things that can be done within exiting force and budget levels.
The Alternatives

First, it is essential that we abandon the Forward Defense, and adopt a more traditional defense in depth. Only in that way can we have any confidence that we shall not necessarily lose the war at the outset if the Soviets are able to surprise us, or if they make a quick and unexpected breakthrough for other reasons we cannot now foresee. The case must be presented to German political leaders – and to the political leaders of the other political leaders – and to the political leaders of the other NATO countries – that this issue is not a military intellectual exercise in how to defend in a fashion most satisfying to military theorists; it is a practical issue of whether we are likely to be able to hold more of Germany with a flexible defense or with a brittle defense.

Second, something needs to be done to reinforce the defense in depth concept, and to give it the best chance of success by assuring the availability of fortifications along the forward edge of the defensive positions, whether we are surprised or not. This also is a thorny political issue for West German politicians. But one possible way of doing it would be to construct a new autobahn just inside the eastern frontier, and build it in such a way that it will assuredly be convertible to a physical obstacle even if the warning is less than an hour.

Third, we should plan to enhance the effectiveness of capability as we can afford without jeopardizing the ability of the defense to deal with the enemy’s echelon. This requires a careful and comprehensive assessment of all conceivable ways in which the war might break out – with emphasis on the situations that could be most dangerous to NATO. In other words, using simulations and war games in which we have reasonable confidence, we should assess what the effect would be if the Soviets were able to launch a surprise attack, or if they were to combine a surprise frontal attack with a deep paratroop or heliborne strike inside our lines, or if they were able to mass unexpectedly strong forces against one sector of the NATO front – or some combination of these. There is reason to believe that even though some such assessments have been made, they have not been done in the comprehensive and systematic manner that is essential for us to know what we could do in one of a number of possible “worst cases.”

Finally, with such assessments behind us, we can prepare contingency plans for any of a number of different situations. In this way we can assure the optimum use of any long-range ground and air force resources to disrupt the Warsaw Pact attacks as early as possible by actions of the sort envisaged by advocates of the new concept, all such actions being coordinated with the basic ground defense plan.

There is no reason whatsoever to assume that the Warsaw Pact will inevitably defeat us – unless we hand them the opportunity on a platter. – End

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