The Pentagon thinks that defense budget cuts have put national security at risk. Many in Congress disagree. The stage is set for a showdown debate on US defense posture.

The Disputed Issue of Risk

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A CONVERGENCE of budgetary and strategic factors is kindling debate over Washington's most critical defense question in years. Has the nation begun sliding into a time of greater military risk?

There is wide agreement in the US defense establishment that security risks can never be eliminated. But the Pentagon and Congress are far from accord on whether today's situation is acceptable.

Among congressional Democrats and some Republicans, there is consensus that the global military balance has been stabilized over the years by a $2 trillion rearmament of US armed forces.

Pentagon leaders, however, insist that new factors threaten to undo the security gains underwritten by this major defense spending effort. The trends, they maintain, point to danger. To quote Defense Secretary Frank C. Carlucci: "The degree of risk is getting to the point where we as a nation have to worry about it."

The upshot, in the year to come, could be the start of a contentious US military reevaluation of the type not seen since the heated debates of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Already, controversy is building about the possible future course of the Soviet military threat under Mikhail Gorbachev's regime. Compounding the uncertainty are arguments about the military effects of potential nuclear-arms reductions by the superpowers.

However, what most fuels concern about the nation's military risks is the budget crunch. There is a sharp decline in Pentagon expectations that it will get the money that it says it needs to man and equip its forces.

In producing a $299.5 billion 1989 spending blueprint, now under congressional review, the Pentagon was obliged to chop $33 billion from a budget plan it already considered minimal.

This will bring about, in the year ahead: smaller forces, via elimination of fighter wings, Army units, and warships; fewer new arms, from strategic nuclear missiles down to Navy carrier bombers and Army artillery shells; and lower technology,

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stemming from flat investment in basic weapons research and fewer new weapons starts.

The spending crunch appears to be long-term. Even in the most optimistic view, the Pentagon will be forced over a five-year period starting in 1990 to make do with some $230 billion less than it had expected as the nation struggles to cope with enormous federal deficits. The long-term result of this squeeze, senior Pentagon officials maintain, is that American security will be at "significantly greater risk."

The Pentagon's conclusions are debatable. Even new Defense Secretary Carlucci concedes that the defense planning process is not a "precise calculus." The military's most comprehensive public estimate of the balance—with American strengths and weaknesses—is put forth in the Secretary's "Annual Report" to Congress. What follows is a distillation of that 325-page Pentagon world view.

The Strategic Competition

No aspect of US defense commands greater Pentagon attention than dissuasion of Soviet resort to nuclear arms. This policy of deterrence is backed, first and foremost, by a vast strategic nuclear arsenal—a triad of land-based, air-breathing, and sea-based firepower. At this level of competition in arms, the Pentagon appears distinctly upbeat about the future.

Today, says Secretary Carlucci, "our assessment is that the overall strategic balance is essentially stable." What's more, he says, the situation may well improve somewhat in years to come.

With the introduction of new weapons—up to fifty Peacekeeper missiles based in silos, a fleet of B-1 bombers, better cruise missiles, and quieter strategic submarines loaded with more accurate ballistic missiles—the assessment is that "US offensive forces are becoming increasingly effective and survivable."

Moreover, says Secretary Carlucci, such future weapons as the Air Force's B-2 Advanced Technology Bomber "will reduce Soviet advantages in some areas" without creating new American vulnerabilities.

It is the modernization of the land-based leg of the triad that poses the greatest problems and risks and shows the greatest effect of the intensifying domestic budget crunch. Shortage of funds has made competitors of two ICBM programs that were supposed to be complementary—the mobile, ten-warhead Peacekeeper and the mobile, single-warhead Midgetman. While both are expensive, the costs of the small missile greatly exceed those of the Peacekeeper and its rail-garrison basing system.

Thus, Secretary Carlucci felt obliged to try to scrap the Midgetman, for an overall savings of some $40 billion in the years ahead. The budget included $200 million to keep the missile on life support, should the next administration wish to revive it.

The original plan had been to go forward with both missiles. "What I am saying to Congress," notes the Secretary, "is I don't see how that can happen. I don't think, given the top line and given our estimates in the outyears, that that's a realistic assessment."

Instead, the Pentagon opted for mobile deployment of the Peacekeeper alone to provide a secure land-based force for the 1990s. It had sought $837 million to develop the rail-garrison basing mode for the supermissile.

It is thought that this system will be somewhat less secure and provide less flexibility than would the two-missile program.

Even Peacekeeper is being slowed. Rather than buying the twenty-one ICBMs that were originally planned, the Pentagon sought procurement in 1989 of only twelve because of the reluctance of Congress in years past to fund more than that number.

Survival of the Carlucci proposal is not assured. There is sentiment in Congress, especially in the House, to resuscitate the Midgetman program and curb or kill mobile Peacekeeper. Pentagon concern is that a bout of political fratricide could in time undermine ICBM modernization altogether.

On the Russian side, the Pentagon finds a mixed strategic picture. The Soviets, the Carlucci report maintains, "no longer speak openly of winning a nuclear war" as they did throughout the 1970s.

Even so, the Soviet force is still structured to conduct a "warfighting" campaign. And there are several troubling weapons developments.

Soviet deployment of mobile SS-24 and SS-25 ICBMs may "significantly alter the Soviet target base" and make it more difficult for the US to attack these assets with its own atomic strike. Moreover, the Pentagon finds much to worry about with regard to Soviet efforts to develop the means to assemble a rudimentary antiballistic-missile defense system that could blunt a weakened US retaliatory strike.

Whatever the concerns, however, the Pentagon report makes this much clear: "The United States has, and will retain for the foreseeable future, the capability to deter a direct [Soviet] nuclear attack."

The Conventional Imbalance

The billions being poured into defense are aimed at doing more than protecting US territory. Beyond this primary duty for the 2,100,000-strong force is the task of protecting US allies and US economic interests abroad.

American theater forces are called on to help prevent Soviet political domination of West European allies, bullying of Japan and other friendly Pacific nations, or disruption of Western access to critical Persian Gulf oil supplies.

How is the US strategy faring? In Secretary Carlucci's words:

- **Western Europe.** Though the Warsaw Pact holds some advantages, "we assess that the combination of Soviet uncertainty in the nuclear and conventional realm is currently enough to deter them from starting a war in Europe."

- **East Asia.** "Although the Soviet Union and its clients retain advantages in some of the regional military balances, several theater-wide factors favor the United States and its allies."

- **Middle East.** "The Soviet Union's proximity to the Persian Gulf region provides it with a significant military advantage," although it is offset somewhat by logistics problems and the hostility of local defense forces.

Pentagon planners emphasize that these assessments, highly
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Leaning military budgets may exacerbate the conventional shortfall in Europe. Equivocal in and of themselves, certain only to peacetime deterrence of Russia's power. Should deterrence fail and war ensue, they say, the outcome for Washington's thinly stretched forces would be grimmer.

Cited as a prime case in point is the situation in Western Europe, where the US and its NATO allies face the brunt of Soviet power. There, in the view of the Carlucci report, the preponderance of Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces "leads us to conclude that in the event of war in Europe, NATO could face the difficult choice of early escalation to the use of nuclear weapons or suffering a conventional defeat."

Secretary Carlucci's concern stems from a number of factors. One development that Washington finds "particularly worrisome" is the further growth of the East bloc's advantage in armor, artillery, and other ground forces on the Continent. This is backed up by a "decided advantage" in modern stocks of chemical weapons.

The Pentagon argues that, in the 1980s, deployments of new American helicopters, main battle tanks, fighting vehicles, and other systems permitted the West to keep pace with the Soviet Union. But now, it claims, the situation is on the verge of a new deterioration.

In the air, the Pact is judged to have a far narrower advantage over Western forces. Soviet-led forces surpass the West in numbers of combat aircraft. But US analyses show that, after thirty days' mobilization on both sides, NATO would be able to improve the balance sharply.

Finally, when it comes to combat sustainability — provision of missiles, bullets, and other war consumables — NATO improvements are seen as having been outstripped by Soviet efforts.

The Soviet Union's presumed conventional supremacy in Europe is counterbalanced in part by the fact that the Kremlin must reckon on the danger of a second-front war against China and on doubtful reliability of its East European allies. And the West is still judged to hold a technological edge in important weapons categories.

The import of these factors, says Secretary Carlucci, is that "at the conventional level, the Soviets may not be confident that their forces are sufficient to guarantee them a high probability of success." Thus, he concludes, they remain deterred from contemplating initiation of war.

Consequences of Cutting Back

What worries US planners is that the effects of leaner military budgets may be changing that situation and changing it to Washington's disadvantage.

They note that an already overcommitted Army and Air Force structure is being reduced even further. The Air Force has abandoned a long-standing goal of building forty tactical fighter wings and will even back down from the thirty-eight it fields today to thirty-five by 1991.

Placed on the chopping block are the seventy-two-plane 474th Tactical Fighter Wing, based at Nellis AFB, Nev., and the 401st TFW based at Torrejon in Spain, which Madrid has ordered removed. If the US finds an alternative European base for the 401st TFW, as seems likely, Washington will deactivate another US-based unit. Further, plans call for reducing the Air Force's reserve squadrons by the equivalent of one wing.

For its part, the Army will lose one brigade from its 9th Light Infantry Division, delay the activation of the 6th Light Infantry Division, de-
activate its Roland air defense unit, and lay up 450 of its Vietnam-era utility helicopters.

The Defense Secretary points out that these reductions, in the main, do not touch US forward-deployed forces, such as heavy tank units, that now confront Soviet power. What it does reduce, he notes, is the nation's strategic reserve of conventional combat forces.

For example, the Army is required to deploy ten divisions to Europe in ten days. The Air Force works under similar pressures.

Adding to the concern is the budget squeeze on new weapons, which Washington wants in order to bolster its units and keep them in action against a numerically superior foe.

Thus far, program cancellations and deferrals have remained confined to relatively marginal systems—the Army's Aquila drone, Copperhead laser-guided artillery projectile, and Anti-Tactical Missile system plus the Air Force's AGM-130 standoff weapon and Sensor-Fuzed Weapon tank-hunter munition, to name a few.

The concern is that a prolonged period of austerity will cut deeper, affecting critical programs. This year's request for the Air Force F-15E multirole aircraft, for example, was reduced from forty-two to thirty-six and may face even greater pressure. The Army wonders where it is to find money to build modern helicopter gunships to support its ground forces in combat.

Compounding this problem is the limited capability of US defense industry to mobilize. If the US were compelled to convert its peacetime industry to all-out military production, the Soviet Union would likely hold an edge in the early going.

That point was made clear in a recent study conducted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It concluded that America's emphasis on high-technology manufacturing—heavily reliant on offshore sources for its components—would impose severe limitations. It would take industry a full eighteen months before achieving significant gains in production of major weapons to contribute to a war in Europe.

Judging from the Carlucci presentation, the strategic outlook in the other major military theaters of the world shapes up as being less bleak than that in Europe.

The prime example is the increasingly important East Asian rim, where the US at present maintains relatively small ground and air contingents to support its interests in Japan, South Korea, and other nations in that vast region.

To be sure, the Pentagon notes that there is a Soviet preponderance of ground forces and airpower in the immediate region, one that focuses principally on the border with China.

Also of "great concern" to US planners is the military balance on the Korean peninsula, where a huge, heavily armed North Korean force poses the danger of surprise attack against Washington's South Korean ally.

Serving to counterbalance this risk to US interests, in the Pentagon's view, are economic trends that run strongly in Washington's favor. China's economic development, it is pointed out, will "pave the way" for "significant improvements in combat capabilities" during the 1990s. The South Korean economy, four times that of its northern antagonist, is underwriting a major military expansion that Pyongyang will find difficult to match. Finally, Japan's economic vitality is seen as leading to increased strength for that pivotal nation.
In sum, says the Carlucci assessment, these factors "make the long-term regional trends in the military balance appear favorable."

In the oil-rich Middle East, the assessment is only slightly less upbeat. There, Secretary Carlucci maintains, "the military balance favors the Soviets, but the combination of our [military and security] efforts and those of countries in the region create significant risks and uncertainties for Soviet planners."

Bolstering the Pentagon's position, in the Carlucci view, are major strides in developing faster airlift and sealift to rush American forces to the distant Persian Gulf. "On balance," he concludes, "our improved capability to project significant [armed] forces rapidly to the region helps to deter Soviet aggression. Should deterrence fail, we can successfully defend the region with substantially fewer ground forces than the Soviets require to seize and occupy it, provided our forces are strongly supported by tactical air."

The Edge in Seapower

The military situation in the major theaters would be cause for greater concern, the Secretary suggests, were it not for the strategic counterweight provided by superior US naval and Marine forces.

Any regional or superpower conflict involving this nation's forces—in the Far East and Mideast, in particular, but in the European theater as well—would require heavy commitment of the Navy to protect the movement of US troops and supplies by sea. It would first be called on to take control of the sea. The Navy's other mission would be to project its air and amphibious power against enemy shores.

At present, the Secretary makes plain, the United States enjoys a clear-cut edge in seapower: "Although the Soviets have improved their naval force's capabilities . . . we are maintaining a maritime balance favorable to the United States."

This represents a marked change from the tone of the early 1980s, when senior admirals openly fretted that Washington had lost its superiority at sea and successfully pushed for a major naval buildup.

It is in its force projection capabilities that the US Navy's superiority becomes most strikingly apparent. For intervention in Third World hotspots or even in major regional conflicts, the Soviet Navy has nothing to compare with the US fleet's fourteen big-deck aircraft carriers and 190,000-strong Marine Corps. And in the Secretary's view, the Navy is in no jeopardy of losing this edge anytime soon.

"The United States Navy," he contends, "will retain significant advantages over the Soviets in tactical airpower [and] long-range power projection."

When it comes to fighting a major war at sea against the Soviets, however, the issue becomes somewhat murkier. The Secretary identifies the Soviet Navy's prime wartime mission to be defense of sensitive waters near the Russian homeland from intrusion by US carriers, cruise-missile-carrying surface warships, and nuclear attack submarines. A secondary mission is to use its submarines to cut US sea lines of communication to Western Europe and Asia.

In this warfare area, the superpower balance is undergoing important change. "The Soviets' continual upgrading of the quality of their attack and cruise missile submarines," says the Pentagon report, "combined with continued improvements in Soviet naval aviation, has permitted Moscow to begin extending 'sea-denial areas' into the southern Norwegian Sea and the northwest Pacific."

In these circumstances, many admirals maintain, any reduction of the Navy's capabilities shapes up as being shortsighted and perilous. Even so, budget pressures appear to be dictating a painful reassessment of some important Navy and Marine Corps goals.

The latest Pentagon budget preparation, for example, defers the achievement of the Navy's plan for a fleet of 600 ships by 1989. There will be 580 instead. Sixteen older frigates are to be retired ahead of schedule. In addition, the Navy has been ordered to stand down one of its active carrier air wings, leaving it with only thirteen.

Also sacrificed in the budget crunch was the Navy's plan to build the A-6F carrier-based attack aircraft. The fleet will make do with less potent models of the A-6 as well as F/A-18 strike fighters until the arrival of the stealthy A-12 Advanced Tactical Aircraft in the mid-1990s.

There are slowdowns of other Navy projects. The Pentagon, in reviewing the Navy's shipbuilding plan, lopped off an LSD-41, a major amphibious vessel, thereby deferring achievement of a marine amphibious shipping goal. The budget funds only three DDG-51 Aegis destroyers, two fewer than the Navy wanted to buy this year to replace ships due for retirement.

It is the fate of the US aircraft carrier fleet, however, that is fueling most concern in the Navy.

The Defense Secretary insists that there has been no change in the goal to achieve and maintain a force of fifteen deployable carriers.

Still, some Navy officers express conviction that the budget situation will inevitably lead to calls for the Defense Department to modify the plan. The Navy currently has fourteen carriers and expects to hit fifteen in 1990, with the activation of the USS Abraham Lincoln.

Already, however, there are suggestions that the Pentagon can achieve major savings by deactivating its two oldest carriers—the USS Midway and USS Coral Sea, both World War II vintage ships. That would take the carrier fleet back down to thirteen decks until at least 1992, when another new carrier is to enter service.

A recent study by the Congressional Budget Office estimates that the move would produce five-year savings of some $4.2 billion.

The Navy maintains that such savings would carry a high cost in terms of additional risks to the nation. Far from being an overambitious goal, its supporters claim, the proposed fifteen-carrier fleet falls well below the JCS wartime "requirement" for more than twenty carriers.

In short, there clearly is no quick fix for the crucial problem of maintaining American strength in the face of a continuing Soviet challenge and the rise of such indigenous Third-World threats as Iran.

The debate over American security risks has just begun. It is bound to intensify as the battle over defense budgets heats up.