
Defense Report

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The Next War: Long or Short?

DOD budget-cutters are becoming somewhat desperate as Defense testimony before the Congress fails to disclose significant "fat" in the FY77 Budget request. As a result, some critics have begun questioning the basic national policy in support of NATO on which DOD bases its combat structure. The question: Will a NATO war be long or short?

DOD is currently preparing for either, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld has told the Congress that, "There is now considerable evidence that the Soviets are taking much more seriously . . . the prospect of a relatively prolonged conventional campaign. . . ."

The short war advocates say in essence that NATO could not withstand an all-out conventional attack and would have to turn to nuclear weapons sooner or later; so let's prepare only for short nuclear war and try to save manpower and dollars.

Those who believe that the U.S. should have the flexibility for a long or short war will have two things going for them. First, a broad spectrum of analysts believe that NATO will not quickly and automatically lose a conventional NATO war. Even Congressman Les Aspin (D-WI) in a recent detailed article in the *Washington Star* pointed out that, all factors considered, NATO and Warsaw Pact forces are comparable. Secretary of State Kissinger stated publicly last December that a war in Europe will "not necessarily" be short and that the U.S. "must have the staying power for a long war." A Kissinger-Aspin axis is not only unusual, but provides a broad base of argument against a short war.

Second and more important to the average U.S. citizen is the fact that the short war theorists place him right in the front line; i.e., a NATO war will be nuclear and most experts believe that once the first nuclear weapon is fired an exchange of strategic weapons between the U.S. and the USSR will soon follow. On the other hand, flexibility provided by conventional NATO staying power makes a longer conventional war possible and thereby offers at least three options designed to keep the average citizen at home out of the front lines: (1) more credible deterrence, (2) time to negotiate prior to the first use of nuclear weapons, and (3) fighting a war to the finish using only conventional weapons.

To most experts, retaining the flexibility for a long NATO war seems far more desirable than placing all the NATO/U.S. eggs in the short, nuclear war basket.