
Defense Report

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Has NATO Tied Its Own Hands?

The American who commands all the military forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has warned that unless the alliance maintains a balanced military capability it will have no choice but to respond to any level of Soviet aggression with nuclear weapons.

General Alexander M. Haig, Jr. told the 1976 Annual Meeting of the Association of the United States Army, held in Washington, there is too much consideration being given to substituting nuclear weapons for strong, expensive conventional forces.

“. . . the Alliance's conventional posture is absolutely critical to the successful deterrence of aggression in Europe—not because conventional forces replace the nuclear elements of our Triad (conventional forces, tactical nuclear weapons and strategic nuclear weapons), but because they are an absolute prerequisite to their credibility,” General Haig said.

As long as the leaders of the Alliance can make a credible conventional response, he continued, the potential aggressor must consider the full range of possible reactions before committing his forces. He should not be able to assume that the Alliance will delay its reaction to his attack while it grapples with the difficult decision to use nuclear weapons.

Haig estimates that the Soviet conventional forces facing NATO's Central Region alone have increased by 130,000 men in the past ten years. This has been accompanied by a 40 percent increase in the number of Soviet tanks and a jump in artillery strength of between 50 and 100 percent in that region. While this growth was taking place the NATO forces were able to achieve some improvement in the ratio of support to combat forces but it in no way matches the Soviet concentration of conventional combat power.

Improvement of the conventional forces is Haig's prime goal. He wants training to be more realistic and alert procedures to be tightly monitored. He wants to make sure that combat stocks of ammunition, fuel and food are properly positioned and in good condition.

Given those well-prepared conventional forces, Haig said, the potential aggressor is faced with more uncertainties—“. . . uncertainties regarding how we would respond, and to what level of conflict his aggression might ultimately propel him.”

Faced with that uncertainty he will be less likely to try anything at all.