
Defense Report

AUSA



Neutron Weapons—A Matter of Credibility

The revelation that the United States has developed a neutron warhead that will kill with high doses of radiation but leave structures and equipment virtually untouched has predictably triggered a heated debate over this latest addition to the potential horror of war.

One Congressional debater has likened the neutron weapons to chemical warfare—insidious killers that leave people dead but all in one piece. But the value of the new weapons is not simply their ability to kill—we have plenty of ways to do that. Their very specific value is that they are more credible than the several thousand tactical nuclear weapons (so-called “ordinary” nuclear weapons) already deployed in support of our NATO allies.

The tactical “nukes” now in the hands of our forces in Europe are one of the strongest elements of our ability to deter aggression by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact partners. They are most effective when detonated as air bursts so the shock waves and heat they produce are maximized. They do produce some radiation but it is minimal when compared to the concentrated rays from a neutron warhead.

NATO would prefer to hold off a Warsaw Pact attack without resorting to nuclear weapons of any kind but, if the NATO forces were in peril of being overwhelmed, they would have to use them. If this should occur the battle would undoubtedly be fought in West Germany and our German allies are not enthusiastic about the prospect of their homeland becoming a nuclear battleground. The Russians know this and may tend to downgrade our determination to use our nuclear weapons. They rightly assume that the decision to employ the destructive power of these weapons on the home territory of an ally will be delayed by debate. This is where the value of the neutron weapons comes in.

With neutron warheads and projectiles available to NATO artillery commanders the factor of damage to friendly territory is eliminated from the decision-making equation. The NATO defenders could be expected to meet a perilous situation with neutron weapons faster than with ordinary nuclear weapons. The attackers could no longer expect a delay in the nuclear response.

Neutron weapons add a new dimension to the ever-increasing complexity of warfare. They also serve to drive the cost of aggression upward—and our fondest hope is to make that price too high for anyone to pay.