
Defense Report

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A Short War in Europe—Is it a Real Possibility or a Budgeteer's Pipedream?

There are many versions of the scenario for the onset of a new war in Europe. Some would have hostilities beginning after a prolonged period of increasing international tension accompanied by observable military build-ups on both sides of the NATO/Warsaw Pact borders. The most popular script at the moment though, forecasts an attack by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies with little or no warning, maximizing their offensive power and rolling up NATO resistance before it really has a chance to get set.

Many who support the little-or-no-warning theory also predict the war will be over quickly—but the identity of the victors seems to depend largely on whether the predictor is trying to build a case for truly effective NATO defense or is simply using the short war theory as a device to avoid spending more money on readiness.

In a much-discussed planning directive the Carter administration asked the military leadership to comment on the feasibility of sustaining a short NATO war at the same time a U.S. corps-sized force was committed to a major emergency in the Persian Gulf area. An additional provision was added—the forces in Europe would have enough support to carry on for just 30 days. In that very brief span of time NATO would have to defeat the Pact forces or bring them to some kind of a stalemate. In view of the growing superiority of the Soviet and Pact forces—in numbers, in firepower and in long-term sustainability—a 30-day defeat/stalemate forced by the NATO defenders is unlikely.

But by clinging to the short war theory the administration can avoid or delay a whole series of decisions that would cost money and political popularity. They needn't worry about whether the U.S. reserve forces are manned and equipped to respond quickly. They don't have to concern themselves with the Selective Service System's inability to provide large numbers of men in time to be trained for participation in the short war. They needn't worry about the ability of the U.S. industrial base to produce ammunition, tanks, or anything else that might be needed in Europe after 30 days of fighting—the war would be over by then.

To the populace of Western Europe and to the men and women who serve in NATO's armed forces, the fiscally-satisfying dictum that they must win in 30 days or expect little in the way of long-term support from the United States must be frightening. The hard fact is inescapable, though. The United States is not now prepared to fight an extended war in Europe and the policy trend in the U.S. administration, despite announcements of good intent toward NATO, is to put all its chips on an implausibly quick victory.