
Defense Report

AUSA



NATO Weapons Should Be Standardized—But a Lot of Realities Stand in the Way

As has been said repeatedly over the past year, the conventional ground combat forces of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies have many advantages over those of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Warsaw Pact has more divisions, more men, more tanks, more artillery—more of just about everything than the NATO forces. But one of its most significant advantages gets far less notice—each of the Pact armies has common equipment that uses common parts and fires common ammunition.

This was also true in the early days of NATO because the United States was supplying equipment to just about everyone. War-shattered European industry did not have the capability to produce armaments at the same time it supported economic recovery. But eventually the heavy industry in France, Germany, Italy and Belgium reentered the weapons-making arena and it was only natural for the armed forces of the individual countries to do business with national weapons-makers.

Military analysts predict that a full-scale conventional confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact would be extremely violent, with losses of men and equipment and consumption of ammunition far exceeding the experience of World War II. In a very short time the advantage would accrue to the side that is best able to keep itself supplied, not necessarily to the side that has the best tactics. To NATO, at the present time, this means multiple supply lines to provide ammunition, fuel and weapons replacements to suit individual national requirements. The Warsaw Pact armies can exist with a single unified supply channel. NATO has made some progress toward standardization in the ammunition and fuel areas but the broad surface has hardly been scratched.

In many instances roadblocks to standardization are set up by such intangibles as national pride. In others, and this is the most frequent impediment to commonality, national economics and the need to provide jobs in defense industry become more important to political leaders than the common military welfare of the alliance. When a choice develops between French, German and U.S. antiaircraft guns for the U.S. Army, Congress is going to take a hard look at a purchase from a foreign supplier.

NATO must coordinate weapons design from the research stage into production to insure maximum commonality of fuels, ammunition and communications. Having achieved that coordination the member nations must set aside petty national jealousies in the interest of overall effectiveness. Short range compromise will pay large dividends over the long term.