
Defense Report

AUSA



The "Arsenal of Democracy" Can't Keep Up With Soviet Conventional Weapons Production

In the last twenty years the Soviet Union has developed and fielded four models of main battle tanks. During that same period the United States has developed two tanks and fielded only one. First the Soviets fielded the T-54 to replace the thousands of T-34's that had been built late in World War II and had been sent all over the world as their armored contribution to "wars of national liberation." The United States responded by developing and gradually fielding the M-60 series of tanks which is still our mainstay.

In the intervening years the Soviet arsenal developed the T-62, the T-64 and the T-72 and immediately began to produce them in quantities sufficient to equip its own forces and those of its primary European allies in the Warsaw Pact. The United States, in the meantime, made improvements in the M-60 tank while it searched for a satisfactory successor. Those improvements to the M-60, in the estimation of armored warfare experts, bring it up to par with the Soviet T-62 but leave it inferior to the last two production models. The United States Army's choice for a new main battle tank, the XM-1, is expected to be able to more than hold its own with the T-64 and T-72 but hopes that its competitive edge would last well into the 1980's have been weakened by the Soviet development of still another tank model, the T-80. The Soviets once again won the armored leapfrog match as the U.S. Army was denied full production of XM-1's until Fiscal Year 1980. The XM-1's superior performance as a fighting machine is acknowledged, but Congress and successive administrations have used recurring technical problems as an excuse for slowing production. Meanwhile, the Soviet Army, unfettered by the democratic process of authorization and appropriation, receives a heavy flow of constantly improving tanks.

This is not a plea for a way to circumvent the democratic process but a suggestion that there may be ways to make it work better. The tank situation does not stand alone. The United States Army is still relying on an armored personnel carrier that entered the inventory 20 years ago. U.S. soldiers are driving trucks and firing cannons that were built before they were born. There must be a way to speed up the process. Would it not be better, for example, to let the Army go into production while the last few minor problems are being worked out, rather than wait until everyone from the development laboratory to Capitol Hill is completely satisfied?

Surely there are risks involved, but are those risks any greater than those we expect our troops to take when we send them into combat with equipment that is a generation or more too old?