
Defense Report

AUSA



The U.S. Army vs. the Soviet Army — Numerical Comparisons Don't Tell the Story

This month a new President will move into the White House and a new Cabinet will take the reins of the executive departments of our government. It will be a time for taking inventories of where we stand economically, socially and militarily as the new administration embarks on the programs it has designed to achieve the goals supported so overwhelmingly by the voters of the United States. One of the things the appointees to offices in the Department of Defense will have to do is to verify the assumptions they have made about our military posture. Hopefully, that verification will reach far below the surface and examine all factors involved.

Since the late 1940s, we have had just one avowed antagonist, the Soviet Union. Our foreign policy and the military structure to support that policy have had their main focus on curbing the political aspirations of the USSR and sustaining the freedom of nations who do not choose the path of communism. So when we set out to measure our military posture it is most natural to gauge it against the forces of the Soviet Union. It is just as natural, although often unfortunate, that we tend to make the comparison on the basis of sheer numbers. That kind of a comparison quickly becomes frightening.

The Soviet Union has 173 army divisions. The United States has 28 — if we include Army and Marine divisions, both active and reserve. The Soviet Army has 50,000 tanks while the U.S. Army and Marine Corps combined have about 11,400. The Russians have 20,000 pieces of artillery while our Army has 2,500. But, as alarming as these counts may seem, they ignore some very real considerations, the first of which is the very slight possibility that the United States ground forces will ever have to face the Soviet ground forces all by themselves. Any true comparison of numbers must include the mutual defense contributions of our allies around the world.

It is far more to the point to have our comparisons based on the quality of our forces and their ability to carry out their missions than to limit the criteria to little more than numbers. Of course, there is a crossover point at which the ideal quality matches the ideal numbers and other points on the curve where one factor is satisfactory, but the second is not. At this time the Army's leadership sees the need for quality as greater than the need for numbers. This applies to people as well as it does to weaponry.

The Army needs to attract and retain more high school graduates in its enlisted ranks and it needs to modernize its equipment by ending the long procurement dry spell that began after the war in Vietnam. Our current tanks, our armored personnel carriers, our helicopter fleet and our air-defense weapons all lag behind the latest Soviet counterparts in capability and there are many other areas in which the Army is playing "catch-up" in order to achieve something better than qualitative parity. Better weapons and equipment have been designed and tested and are ready to be produced. We must have modern weapons to give to the good people we hope to recruit.