
Defense Report

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Slighting Conventional-Warfare Readiness for Strategic Renewal—Is It the Right Path?

President Reagan has made numerous references to what he calls “a window of vulnerability” existing today in any military comparison between the United States and its most likely major adversary, the Soviet Union. The window, the President says, favors the USSR now and will continue to expand in its favor unless we begin to take positive action to redress some of the imbalances in comparative military power. While he leaves little doubt that the unfavorable comparison extends almost completely across the military spectrum there is even less doubt that he considers our strategic shortcomings most crucial.

As the need to tighten the federal purse strings has deepened, the Administration has seemed to limit its concern over the apportionment of the reduced defense budget to the share to be allotted to any or all of several strategic weapons system. Thus, we hear reports that the Secretary of Defense and the President are wrestling with decisions involving the MX missile system, the Trident missile-carrying submarine and a new, manned strategic bomber. Little is said about what we see when we look through the “window of vulnerability” to view our conventional-warfare capabilities.

All we know at this moment is that while the MX/Trident/B-1 debate is in full flux the decisions have already been made to slow production of a badly needed new tank, to kill a promising battlefield air-defense system, to curtail procurement of ammunition, and to back off from mobility initiatives. Dozens of other actions are being planned which will have immediate negative impact on our ability to meet conventional threats throughout the world.

Few seriously debate the basic premise that if the USSR decides on an openly aggressive course it has the conventional combat power, including the naval and the air and sealift power, needed to strike at multiple targets without resorting to nuclear weapons. It is in these conventional-warfare comparisons that the United States is least ready to defend its far-flung national interests. Before we lock ourselves into a crushingly expensive course of strategic modernization we must be sure that we can cope with the greater likelihood of conventional confrontation.