
Defense Report

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Rebuilding America's Defenses—Have We Slighted Conventional Forces?

The first mission of the U.S. Army is to "deter and, if necessary, defeat a Warsaw Pact attack on NATO and maintain its territorial integrity and security." All other arms and services in the U.S. Defense establishment exist solely to support the accomplishment of that and the Army's half-dozen additional worldwide missions. With that in mind, the wisest allocation of our limited resources would demand assignment of the top priority to preparations for ground warfare—which is, after all, the most likely contingency.

Yet the Secretary of Defense has set the highest priority in coming years on the buildup of nuclear weapons, often, it seems, at the expense of conventional forces. Assuredly, he is under heavy pressure from Congress which demands cuts to conform with budget balancing and reducing/eliminating the huge national deficit. Even so, slighting conventional-warfare readiness for strategic renewal does not seem to be the right path to take.

The record of this administration is one of positive action to redress some of the imbalances in comparative strategic power between West and East. Unfortunately, a failure to pay proper attention to landpower has put us on the short end of a dangerous imbalance in conventional weapons.

It is a fact that from 1980 to 1985, U.S. spending on nuclear weapons has risen exactly twice as fast as spending on conventional weapons. This overemphasis on the rapid buildup of strategic nuclear forces, in effect, lowers the nuclear threshold, making it more likely that a war in Europe would escalate into nuclear conflict at a very early date.

In order to address adequately the full range of our defense needs, our government needs to allocate resources in a manner which would establish a better balance between some reasonable maintenance of nuclear parity and the modernization of our conventional forces. The fact remains that without the essential element of landpower, no conventional war has ever been brought to a successful conclusion. Sacrificing preparations for ground combat to a faster nuclear weapons buildup could prove to be an extremely dangerous principle to follow.