
Defense Report

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The Bush Arms Control Initiatives— We Must Proceed With Caution

Since it was first unveiled at the May NATO Summit, President Bush's conventional arms control proposal has been warmly received at home and abroad. At home, Congressional leaders, opinion makers and the American public have expressed strong support for Bush's plan. The response among our NATO allies was also positive.

The Bush announcement, in effect, enlarged the list of items to be addressed in the Conventional Forces in Europe talks which started in Vienna in March. In addition to the relative numbers of main battle tanks, artillery and armored personnel carriers, which were its initial focus, NATO is now agreeing to consider aircraft, helicopters and total numbers of troops. The overall objective is to achieve equal force capabilities at some reduced level.

The most intriguing part of the proposal was the offer to cut 20 percent of U.S. Army and Air Force combat manpower—30,000 people—from our forces in Europe, providing the Soviets would also reduce forces so that each would end up with 275,000. To accomplish this, the Soviets would have to remove approximately 325,000 men.

Bush agreed to discussions on short range nuclear weapons, but only after an agreement on conventional force reductions had been made. To lend urgency, the President asked that the conventional force talks be accelerated to reach an agreement in six months to a year and that the reductions be accomplished by 1992 or 1993.

While all this has some positive overtones, it also has some serious force implications. With 30,000 combat troops at stake in Europe, the Army, of necessity, will take the brunt of the cuts and the whole process will have a profound ongoing impact on U.S. force structure and stationing decisions.

A strong word of caution is in order. No U.S. forces should be withdrawn before the agreements are firmly in place and both sides can act concurrently in accord with their provisions.

We must constantly emphasize that this process should not be grabbed at as a quick way to cut defense spending. Premature and arbitrary budget cuts will reduce our options and will seriously undermine our negotiating position.