

Soviets excell in defense budget . . . Is NATO ready to defend or deter?

EDITOR'S NOTE — There are conflicts among NATO nations that reduce that organization's combat effectiveness, but NATO's biggest readiness problem is the readiness of its members to pay the high price of deterrence.

By **HUGH A. MULLIGAN**
AP Special Correspondent
CASTEAU, Belgium — How ready is NATO?

Here at the command post of Western Europe's defenses, where military men come and go talking of scenario, the question invariably is answered with another question: ready for what?

Choose your scenario: nuclear, conventional or guerrilla war. Then the question proliferate. Ready with what? How soon?

With a nervous flick of the pointer, the briefing officer sweeps the man from the Baltic to the Bosphorus, indicating the tiny red flags and cut-out figures that show overwhelming Warsaw Pact superiority in everything from troops, tanks and artillery to strategic missiles and tactical aircraft, with the huge Soviet Navy deployed on the flanks.

The Mediterranean no longer is a NATO lake. The 40,000-ton Kiev, Russia's first aircraft carrier, dramatized that point in July when it steamed through the Dardanelles to join a fleet of 70 other Soviet ships in the Mediterranean, one more than the U.S. Sixth Fleet.

The Atlantic these days is prowled by twice as many Soviet submarines as German U-boats in the darkest days of World War II, each capable of raining havoc on a distant continent.

At a time when the world is witnessing what Gen. Alexander M. Haig, Jr., the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, calls "a literal explosion in Warsaw Pact capabilities," the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been cutting back and falling back because of economic and political problems. While the Soviets have been outspending the United States in the last decade in research, systems development and troop build-up, an offense posture far beyond any pretense of self-defense, NATO defense budgets are under pressure from the recession, inflation and the oil price increase.

NATO's fundamental precept of readiness, spelled out so explicitly in Article 5 of the Charter — "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all" — no longer seems relevant to the realities of Soviet nuclear parity with the West.

"Spreading through Europe is a sense of cultural pessimism, a defeatism, a kind of European Buddhism as foretold by Nietzsche," warns Julian Critchley, Conservative British MP and chairman of the Defense and Armaments Committee of the Western European Assembly.

C. C. van den Heuvel, director of the East-West Institute in The Hague, speaks of "a crisis of values in all Western countries, particularly in the Netherlands" brought about by decreasing influence of the churches, changing attitudes towards communism, increased trade and tourism with the Eastern bloc. He says changing attitudes prompt many people, especially the younger generation, to wonder whether the values represented by NATO and its more authoritarian members "are really worth defending."

Socialist governments within NATO find it increasingly hard to defend defense budgets against leftist demands to maintain and increase their welfare states.

NATO's obsolete air defense system badly needs an airborne radar that can detect the generation of high-speed, automatically controlled Soviet aircraft capable of coming in fast and low. One answer is the radar-stuffed Boeing E-3A, which can look down on these low flyers and direct fighters and missiles to intercept them. But they cost \$57 million apiece, the price of a large secondary school or medium-size hospital.

Lulled by 30 years of peace in Europe and the comforting shadow of the American nuclear umbrella, NATO budget planners realize one shell for an M-60 tank would pay a pensioner's fuel bill for the winter and a nuclear submarine is as costly as several housing projects.

NATO's basic value as a deterrent to surprise attack depends on the troops it can mobilize, deploy and reinforce by sea, land and air, but the flexible response and "controlled escalation" that is today's NATO strategy is severely tempered by budget slashers, by squabbles almost to the point of war between alliance members like Britain and Iceland, Greece and Turkey, and by Communists in the cabinets of Italy or Portugal being privy to defense secrets.

NATO consists of the United States, Canada, Iceland, Norway, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Holland, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Greece and Turkey.

Because of cuts in the Royal

Navy's amphibious fleet and the RAF's transport squadrons, Britain's Royal Marine Commandos, a vital reinforcement element on NATO's northern flank, will be taken to Norway for exercises this fall in commercial ferries, which do not have helicopter decks and can only put in at safe harbors.

The Royal Navy, at its smallest in 80 years, has not only pulled back East of Suez but East of Gibraltar. The RAF, cut back by nearly 90 per cent in the past 20 years, now has about 100 home-based fighters to defend Britain and close to 60 North Sea oil platforms valued at more than \$500 billion.

The capability of the RAF's vertical take-off Harrier strike aircraft has been impaired by government cancellation of a multimillion-dollar order for the new NATO blind landing system that can be dropped by parachute and assembled in minutes by two men. The RAF regards the system as vital because the Harriers, deployed deep in forests, could be the only aircraft to survive a Soviet attack.

Even with full mobilization of its reserves, Britain today has a smaller army than Finland, Sweden or Switzerland. Key armored units and equipment have been removed from the Army of the Rhine, once a bulwark of NATO's central front, for duty in Ulster.

Norway and Denmark do not allow foreign troops or bases on their soil and decline to stockpile atomic ammunition.

Haig warns that the conscript armies of Holland, Belgium, Italy and France are vulnerable to subversion by Russian KGB agents.

West Germany's Bundeswehr, probably the best disciplined and best equipped army in the world, is a prime target for the estimated 15,000 undercover agents who have crossed from East Germany in the guise of refugees and Communist defectors. West Germany's latest spy scandals included the arrests of three Defense Ministry employees.

The U.S. Seventh Army, the mainstay with West Germany in the center of the NATO line, is better trained, better led and has higher morale and a lower crime rate than five years ago. It still suffers shortages in stocks of equipment, some of which was withdrawn for shipment to Israel during the Yom Kippur war. No front line units are without their quotas of tanks and tracked vehicles, but Gen. George Blanchard, commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, estimates it may

be a year and a half before the production lines and cargo ships can refill war reserve warehouses and ammunition bins.

Because of recession and unemployment, the volunteer army has become a buyer's market, and re-enlistment rates running as high as 80 per cent in some units, mostly Vietnam veterans. The U.S. Army in Europe is turning down 10 to 15 per cent of its re-enlistment applicants for character and behavior flaws.

NATO planners worry most about the deteriorating southern front. A strong Communist presence in the Italian government could threaten the home of the U.S. Sixth Fleet and 40 to 50 NATO bases. "A snuff of oil in the Aegean," as one NATO staff officer diagnosed it, has worsened to the brink of war the Turkish-Greek feud over Cyprus. Greece has withdrawn from the military wing of NATO, and the Turks have taken control of 26 U.S. bases and moved closer to Russia.

What if there were a war and no one came? NATO might soon face such a dilemma with its On-Call Naval Force for the Mediterranean. That force is supposed to be activated with ships from Turkey, Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom operating together in an emergency. But the ships might not be sent if the nations don't trust each other.

NATO's agreement for base facilities on Malta will end in 1979, and the Russians are poised to move in.

There is anxiety among NATO planners about the neutral belt running from the Aegean to the upper Rhine through Yugoslavia, Austria and Switzerland when 83-year-old Tito passes on. A hard-line Communist takeover then could lead to Soviet bases on the Adriatic Sea, cutting NATO's defenses at the middle of the southern flank and giving the Warsaw Pact forces their

first real toehold on the shore since the Russians were invited out of Egypt when 83-yr-old Tito passes on.

"The Soviets can't get at Italy without coming through Yugoslavia. If Tito dies and they go over to hard-line Warsaw Pact, we're not

going to have any warning time," says Maj. Gen. Ray Robinson, chief of staff of the allied air forces in southern Europe.

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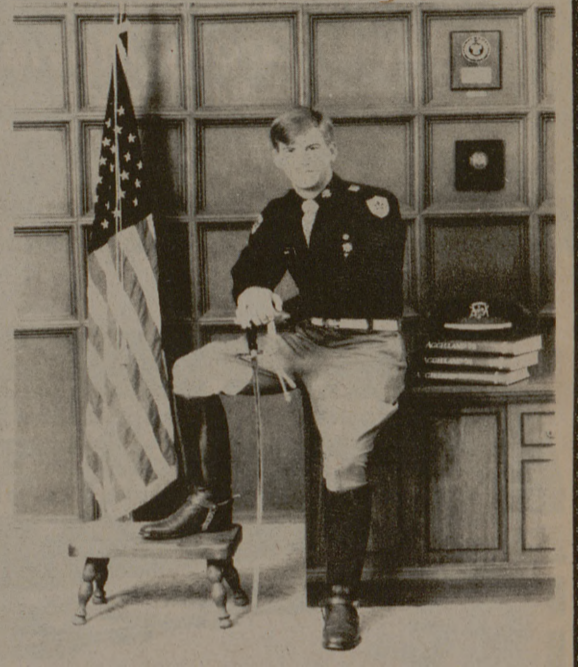
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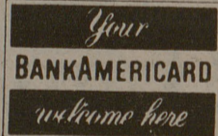
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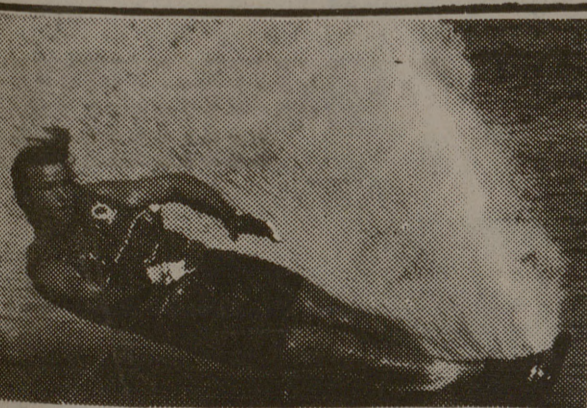
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