
DISCUSSION

Can Europe Really be Defended?

By Helmut Sonnenfeldt



GEORGE QUESTER (ENCOUNTER, September) paints a relatively rosy picture of the prospects for Western defence in Central Europe. Briefly, he believes that non-nuclear technologies now becoming increasingly available for anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons can go a long way in nullifying (or at least offsetting) the Warsaw Pact build-up of recent years in armoured vehicles, aircraft and manpower. Quester's underlying argument is that it is basically desirable to strengthen the defensive side of military capabilities, and that the new technologies have this general effect. When the defence "dominates", the result (he feels) is to make all-out conventional attack, and hence War, less likely. Limited Soviet land-grabs would still be a danger and, at least pending introduction of more local militia-like forces, will be most effectively deterred by the political and economic costs that would ensue. But even these contingencies would become less likely as deterrence of a large invasion becomes more effective. Quester concludes, *inter alia*, that the "Neutron Bomb" could well be made redundant by the new anti-tank warfare technologies, thus avoiding deployment of a system which might blur the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons. Generally, if the opportunities for non-nuclear defence, and hence deterrence, are fully explored, the threat of nuclear escalation could decline considerably in importance, and numerical com-

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parisons of NATO and Warsaw Pact forces may become less frightening and less significant.

The Quester thesis is not new, but he has presented one of the more sustained arguments to appear in public print for a more optimistic view of the emerging military balance in Europe. His general case for strengthening security by strengthening the Defence (rather than the Offence) is, I believe, sound. It may be recalled in this regard that, whatever the complexities that have appeared in the meantime, the original Western approach to the MBFR negotiations in the 1970s was to devise proposals which, if implemented, would reduce the likelihood of surprise and reduce the effectiveness of offensive as against defensive military capabilities.

Quester recognises that the distinction between Offence and Defence is not necessarily clear-cut, although, in my view, he does not deal with the problem in adequate depth. Thus, the side suffering aggression (i.e. NATO), may nevertheless become the attacker when *counter*-attacks are launched against advancing or exposed enemy forces, and efforts are made to retake lost territory. One needs to examine more fully how new technologies, on both sides, would affect this stage of the battle. Quester tends to minimise or even beg the issue by arguing that such contingencies may not arise at all because the original attack can be more easily blunted by use of new anti-tank missiles and precision-guided munitions and so may be precluded from occurring in the first place.

Quester also notes the effectiveness of new surface-to-air missiles against aircraft. There should have been more analysis of the impact on the effectiveness of aircraft of new types of air-to-surface missiles and of other means of penetration. He also pays little or no attention to problems of command and control in contemporary and future conventional warfare in Europe.

IN GENERAL, HIS ANALYSIS gives greatest weight to the introduction of new technologies in NATO forces and attempts no net assessment of the evolving impact of such technologies on the forces of both sides. (As I write these comments, the US press reports experiments with laser beams against anti-tank missiles.)

I raise these matters not because I have a fundamental quarrel with the case for a strong, modern, non-nuclear defence in Europe. On the contrary, I welcome the extent to which the introduction of new technologies and other actions being undertaken to improve NATO forces and their readiness are increasing the chances of effective initial defence. I raise them because I would like to see Quester's case made even more convincing, and because discussions

such as these should help us identify the directions along which more study and greater effort may be required.

In particular, I find Quester's case against the "Neutron Bomb" (actually artillery shells) dubious. I do not believe the weapon was intended to be the sole or even principal means of anti-tank warfare. It was judged, on balance, to be an effective addition to such means—and hence an addition to Deterrence. I am not aware that procedures and doctrines for using this particular weapon, as distinct from other theatre nuclear weapons in process of modernisation, would reduce the "firebreak" between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons. For an aggressor to know that it is available to the other side would, I believe, add to stability. The inflamed public discussion and political mishandling of the issue earlier this year obscured these points.

More generally, while some of the technologies now becoming available or in prospect will permit the use of "conventional" (i.e. non-nuclear) munitions where nuclear weapons were hitherto considered more effective or necessary, this does *not* spell the end of the need for nuclear defence.

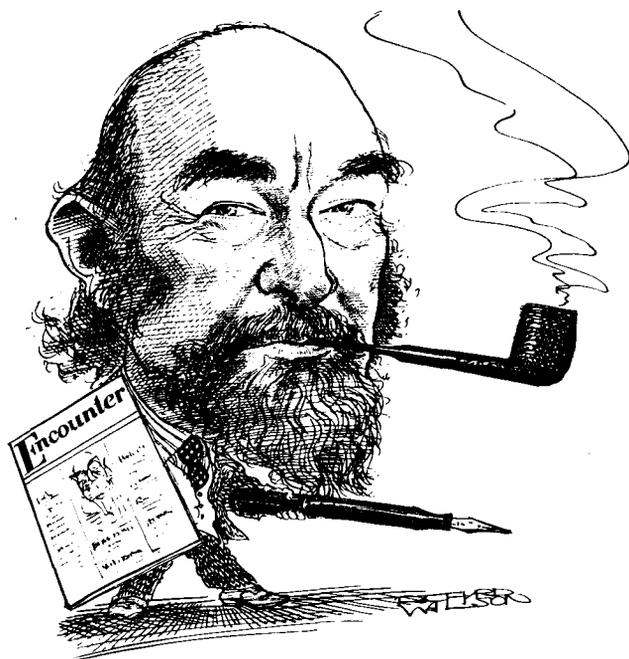
FURTHERMORE, BEFORE WE become too conclusive in anticipating prospective "stability" we need to take fuller measure of what the Soviets would or might do to offset—in their turn—the improvements in defensive capabilities being introduced in the West. The Soviets have made (and continue to make) massive investments in their forces in Europe, not only in tanks but in a whole array of equipment.

I think Quester's assessment of the possible motivations for the build-up, particularly of armoured vehicles—essentially "inertia", and (in his view, more plausible) the need to keep Eastern Europe under control—is perhaps too simple. The fact is, that in recent years, the Soviet build-up has not only increased and improved the Warsaw Pact's general capacity for attack, but has tended to reduce the warning-time NATO could expect to have before an attack is launched.

It is unlikely that this would be entirely the product of "inertia" or of Soviet security concerns about Eastern Europe. Even if they harboured no specific intention to attack, the *offensive* potential of their forces—as well as the possibilities that this potential may have intimidating effects in the West—will hardly have escaped the Soviet leaders who make the decisions to allocate the costly resources involved. Thus it is at least not self-evident that the Soviets would stand idly by while the effects of their exertions are eroded or nullified.

A GAIN, I MUST REPEAT, these observations are not intended to detract from the basic proposition, but to reinforce it. The West is right to use its technological and other assets to redress the balance. It is right to take actions that make successful attack from a standing start, or with little warning, less likely and feasible. It is right to take steps that may help to make the most offensive elements in the Soviet forces "wasting assets." It is right to improve Western capabilities for non-nuclear defence in the first instance, though it must take care to avoid the pitfalls of "decoupling" it from nuclear defence. There is no question that "the most credible defence" is also "the most credible deterrent." I agree that there has been some salutary progress. More is needed, including efforts to make Allied forces technically more compatible with each other. And if it turns out that the projected 3% annual increase in real Defence spending which NATO countries have agreed upon for the coming years is inadequate, that figure may have to be reconsidered.

In any event, whether or not one shares all of George Quester's hopes, there is reason to view the security of the future in Europe with some sober confidence—if we use our assets correctly and recognise that as long as the Soviets are committed to amassing military power of all kinds (incidentally, largely irrespective of fluctuations in Western military programmes) we cannot relax.



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