

Military Review

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N A T O

UNITED STATES

FORCE LEVELS

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THE decision of the Canadian Government to withdraw most of its North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops from Europe is only the latest embodiment of NATO troubles and indicates a growing dilemma for the United States. Congressional and other pressures for reducing the conventional strength of NATO that had been growing out of a tangle of economic and political factors prior to the Czech crisis are reasserting themselves. Yet the invasion of Czechoslovakia has altered profoundly the military and political situation in Europe.

Looked at from some viewpoints, arguments for a strong US conventional military presence in Europe may be more pressing than ever. Yet the

cost of maintaining force levels continues to rise. As events hasten the convergence of these opposing tendencies, an important decision point on appropriate US forces in NATO may be nearing.

The planned Canadian troop removal is a major indication that the importance placed on the conventional strength of NATO has declined in some quarters. Former President Charles A. de Gaulle's withdrawal of French forces from the "military side" of NATO, besides reducing NATO troop strength and removing vital geo-military depth, signified a break in NATO unity and damaged morale. The move was particularly damaging in terms of conventional defense.

Moreover, in the United States, it led to intensified congressional review of the cost effectiveness of NATO, particularly in view of recurring balance-of-payments crises, anger over the less-than-eager sharing of burdens by other, increasingly prosperous, alliance members, and hopes for a *detente* with the Soviet Union.

Need Questioned

The question was seriously raised as to whether there was any longer a good reason for maintaining high US troop levels in Europe. It had been costly. In the view of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, men and equipment were needed more in Vietnam, and US NATO forces were cannibalized. Moreover, relations with the Soviets seemed to be improving. Indeed, some observers seemed to believe that Europe was entering a new economic and political era in which NATO might become an anachronism.

In addition, the official rationale for the existence of large conventional NATO forces—the doctrine of flexible response—remained controversial. Opponents of the doctrine found it inconceivable that the Soviets, if they intended an invasion, would attempt to take Western Europe with purely conventional military means. Was it realistic to imagine that the escalation of such a conflict could be “managed?” Central to their argument was the belief that the strategic nuclear power of

the United States is the only meaningful deterrent to a Soviet invasion.

Then, NATO considered the possibility of balanced mutual force reductions involving NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Plans also were made for the redeployment of a portion of US NATO troops to the United States. All these factors seemed to be creating momentum for a decrease in NATO conventional forces.

That momentum, of course, was reversed by the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968. Those who had previously urged that the US commitment in troops to NATO should at least be maintained, and perhaps even strengthened, reiterated their recommendations. In October 1969, the political and military chiefs of NATO, meeting in Brussels, urged an improvement in NATO defenses. At present, as congressional pressures for reduction increase, the official US position on reduction seems to be that of maintaining the *status quo* until balanced reduction involving the Warsaw Pact can be investigated further.

Factors for Increase

Several factors and situations—some stemming from Czechoslovakia and some more traditional—could now influence the Richard M. Nixon administration to maintain, or perhaps increase somewhat, the US troop commitment to NATO:

- The diminishing of NATO territory through the French initiative, together with the reductions in NATO forces, has degraded the NATO capability to wage conventional war. On the other hand, there has been an increase in Soviet forces stationed in Eastern Europe as a result of the renewed presence of Soviet troops on Czech soil. In addition, the Soviets

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have conducted a general buildup of naval power in the Mediterranean.

- Should the US troop commitment in Vietnam be reduced considerably, there could be an increase in US NATO forces. If the administration is considering strengthening the US NATO conventional posture, it may be reluctant to do so until the US military

In the meantime, the problem remains of what the appropriate military strength of the Federal Republic should be. Will it increase if the French remain negative, other NATO members reduce force levels, and the United States does not enlarge its own NATO forces?

- The increasing Soviet strategic



Sentinel

Canada has made a substantial contribution to the six-country NATO Standing Naval Force, Atlantic, which is commanded by a Canadian commodore

involvement in Vietnam has been scaled down.

- In Western Europe, both old and new problems concerning French and German military and political posture could have a bearing on determining US force levels. Since the election of Georges Pompidou, questions have arisen as to the perspective of the relationship of France to NATO. It seems likely that, in the near term, the French attitude toward NATO will remain negative. The expense and political retraction inherent in rejoining the military side of NATO could prove prohibitive for the French.

power may be one of the most significant influences on US decisions about appropriate US conventional force levels in NATO. The argument in favor of large conventional forces essentially has been that the strategic balance of terror may have increased the probability of aggression through conventional means. Accordingly, NATO must have strong tactical forces or face the unacceptable options of responding to a conventional Soviet invasion of Western Europe either by immediate nuclear response or by capitulation. In the face of growing Soviet strategic power—the highly pub-

licized SS-9 deployments, for example—this argument could create pressure for additional US troops in NATO.

If the decision to maintain or increase US troops in Europe is made, it will be made upon these and other considerations. However, the key factors are probably twofold. First is the extent to which the deployment of Soviet troops into Eastern Europe has increased following the Czech crisis.

German Buildup

The other factor involves the German question. The French initiative and the planned Canadian reductions, together with the qualitative and quantitative decreases in US forces caused by requirements in Vietnam, may have enhanced the potential for strengthening of West German forces. But if the Nixon administration is, indeed, emphasizing improving United States-USSR relations, significant strengthening of West German forces would almost certainly be discouraged. Since the administration also has stressed the importance of negotiating with the Soviets from a position of strength, the final outcome could be US efforts to bolster NATO not only symbolically, but qualitatively and quantitatively, with US troops and equipment.

At present, there is no substantial evidence that the Germans wish to build up their own forces. One reason is economics, as demonstrated by their lags in purchasing military equipment from the United States under agreements: a buildup would be extremely expensive. Although virtually any radical politics in Germany is news, centrist positions are clearly popular in Germany today. Bonn has been attempting formally to improve relations with the Soviets since Willy Brandt became Chancellor.

Although the Germans might wish

for more numerous US forces in Europe, and will probably voice concern if some US NATO forces depart, they can understand the military constraints on them in the nuclear era. In the face of Soviet power, they must remain dependent upon the United States for their security. Certainly, the United States should be able to maintain accord with West Germany on an appropriate military establishment for the Federal Republic.

Even with the German question aside, however, the fact remains that the conventional Soviet force in the European area is growing. There is no doubt that the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia has frightened some West Europeans sufficiently that they are now downgrading talk of "post-NATO" developments. Certainly, the continued Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia affords a politically acceptable rationale for maintaining or increasing US NATO forces.

Factors for Decrease

Yet the Nixon administration ultimately may decide on smaller conventional NATO forces. For some time, other NATO members have expressed doubts that there is need for current force levels. British Defense Minister Denis W. Healey has maintained that NATO would have to rely early on a nuclear response if attacked by the Warsaw Pact. French military experts such as General Andre Beaufre have criticized the doctrine of flexible response as damaging to the credibility of the nuclear deterrent. There have been analyses such as Carl H. Amme's, illustrating the uncertainties in managing the escalation of a NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict.¹

¹ Carl H. Amme, Jr., *NATO Without France: A Strategic Appraisal*. The Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif., 1967.

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Perhaps as important is the fact that the Nixon administration may be more strategically oriented than the previous two administrations, and thus somewhat more in line with the emphasis on strategic deterrence that characterized the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration.

Argument for Reduction

The main points of an argument to decrease US NATO forces might include the following:

- A Warsaw Pact advantage in conventional forces need not invite an attempt at conventional parity on the part of NATO. NATO is a defensive alliance. The present NATO strength in conventional arms is adequate for defense since the Soviets must enjoy perhaps as great as a three to one advantage in forces to achieve victory in a purely conventional conflict. In the critical Central Region, there is at present near parity in troop numbers between NATO and Warsaw Pact forces. Given the US strategic and tactical nuclear capabilities, it is extremely unlikely that the Soviets would risk a conventional conflict.

- Nor does it seem possible that the NATO forces could be overwhelmed through being surprised by a sudden, massive Warsaw Pact invasion. In spite of the speed of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia, there were serious logistic and command and control shortcomings in the operation. Moreover, it is a far different matter to invade Czechoslovakia with a relatively small portion of Warsaw Pact military might than to attempt a full-scale conventional invasion of Western Europe. The massive preparations for such an endeavor could not be sufficiently masked by "maneuvers" to prevent NATO from assuming an appropriate alert status.

- The argument that NATO forces must increase because of the presence of Soviet forces in Czechoslovakia is questionable. The Soviet-led occupation of Czechoslovakia remains primarily an attempt to stifle tendencies toward greater freedom in that country. Intended also as a warning throughout the bloc, it follows a Soviet pattern of repressing "unorthodox" leaders and political organizations. But it does not automatically follow that the occupation hastens a military conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

- It is true that the Soviets enjoy a natural geographic advantage with regard to conventional forces because of the proximity of their large forces deployed in the western military districts of the USSR. But they could place little confidence in the loyalty and cohesiveness of other Warsaw Pact forces in a war against the West, especially if NATO inflicted severe punishment on the Warsaw Pact forces.

- Therefore, intensified Soviet political and psychological problems in disciplining the bloc, and their added economic strains resulting from the expenditures for more naval and ground capabilities in Europe, need not cause the United States to expend more of its resources in Europe, attempting to create a conventional arms parity that seems strategically and tactically unnecessary.

- Maintaining current US troop levels is extremely expensive. The net military deficit of the United States in Europe exceeds one billion dollars annually, so that the current deployment there of over 300,000 US military personnel and their dependents contributes significantly to our over-all balance-of-payments deficit. Since costs are increasing, this deficit can



NATO Letter

More attention in NATO defense planning is being given to the contingency that there may be troop strength reductions

only become greater in future years. Added to this is the fact that some 12 billion dollars of the US defense budget are required for our NATO-related forces. Since manpower is a large cost item, troop reductions could result in a significant savings.

The question of appropriate US force levels in NATO, therefore, revolves essentially around economic problems and changing strategic and tactical concepts. Obviously, the United States no longer possesses overwhelming nuclear and nuclear delivery capabilities. There are, on the other hand, growing economic and political limitations on implementing the doctrine of flexible response, and these are acutely dramatized in the context of NATO.

If other NATO members begin to decrease their concrete military support of the alliance, to what extent can the United States be expected to increase its direct financial contribution

to maintaining the conventional military strength of NATO? Below a certain level of reduced conventional strength, NATO no longer possesses a credible claim to the ability to respond flexibly in military crises. The expense to the United States of maintaining NATO above such a level eventually may become prohibitive.

It is, of course, difficult to predict a "final" outcome to this dilemma. However, for the near-term outlook, several key points can be noted.

First, it seems evident that few influential observers question the basic need for a US tactical presence in Europe. Few quarrel in principle with the US tactical approach to European defense. In a nuclear world of uncertainties, the doctrine of flexible response is basically sound, and thus the concept of balanced forces is axiomatic. These principles were adopted officially as operating principles by NATO in 1967. In the shortrun at

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least, agreement on the validity of this doctrine should continue.

Second, if significant reductions occur, it may be a period of at least a year or more before they begin to be implemented. There are several reasons for this. It appears that serious efforts will be made to bring about mutual balanced force reductions through discussions with the Soviets. In December 1969, NATO officially challenged the Warsaw Pact to show that its proposal for a European security conference will deal with the "central issue—mutual and balanced reductions of forces in Europe in terms of areas and numbers."² Such discussions may be some time off if, indeed, they occur.

Neither side may be entirely prepared at present to table specific approaches. There is indication that NATO is still preparing alternative models for reductions and intends to study measures which could result from agreement on mutual and balanced force reductions. If it is decided that economic pressures eventually are going to leave no choice but to return a portion of the US force to the United States, probably strong efforts will be made to explore such mutual pullbacks before any unilateral moves take place. This could mean a delay in significant reductions for the time being.

Another reason for some delay in reductions, whether they are unilateral or mutual, is the growing recognition within the alliance of the need for further discussion of a NATO defense posture. According to some observers,

it is possible that, unless there soon is a searching review of NATO's defense arrangements by the United States and its fellow members, considerable confusion and disarray may characterize the alliance in the future. Certainly, a series of uncoordinated unilateral troop reductions by alliance members could damage the status and effectiveness of NATO. NATO nations hopefully will consider the need for frank discussion on the question of defense adjustments and funding prior to any large-scale reductions.

Whether significant reductions actually will occur within the next several years could also depend on a number of intangibles. There may be another crisis in Europe such as the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. Economies realized by troop reductions in Vietnam and elsewhere may assist in relieving the balance-of-payments deficit incurred by our NATO deployments. Either or both of these developments could postpone reductions.

In the meantime, however, more attention in NATO defense planning and training will be given to the contingency that there may be reductions. Reinforcement exercises such as *Reforger I* would seem central to such preparations. Further study of the use of dual-based forces—the implementation of airlifts and retention of European-based stocks—are also significant in these terms. Indeed, whatever the final outcome, there must be continuing effort at preparing NATO forces to serve the requirements for peace.

² "NATO to Challenge East on Talks," *The New York Times*, 4 December 1969.