

IMPLICATIONS OF THE GORBACHEV FORCE CUTS

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**IMPLICATIONS OF THE GORBACHEV FORCE CUTS**

**James A. Thomson<sup>1</sup>**

**Statement Before  
Defense Appropriation Subcommittee  
Senate Committee on Appropriations**

**February 9, 1989**

Mr. Chairman:

In my testimony, I will discuss the military and political implications of the unilateral force reductions recently announced by the Soviet Union and East European countries. In the main, I will cover the military implications, touching briefly on the political implications at the end.

These cuts will be important when they are carried out. However, a number of questions remain about details that leave large uncertainties about their ultimate military effect. The political effect, however, is already substantial.

The most essential points were contained in President Gorbachev's speech to the United Nations on December 7, 1988: The overall size of the Soviet armed forces will be cut by 500,000 men; six tank divisions will be withdrawn from Eastern Europe and disbanded; 50,000 men and 5,000 tanks will be removed from Eastern Europe; Soviet forces in the western USSR and Eastern Europe will be reduced by 10,000 tanks, 8,500 artillery pieces, and 800 combat aircraft.

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In the period since the Gorbachev speech, additional details have emerged. The manpower reduction will be partitioned as follows: 240,000 from the European part of the Soviet Union, 200,000 from the east, and 60,000 from the south. Fifty-three hundred, not 5,000 tanks, will be redeployed from Eastern Europe into the western Soviet Union. Of the 10,000 tanks to be reduced, about half will be "liquidated" and the other half converted to civilian use. The Soviet defense budget will be reduced by 14 percent. In addition, the Soviets and East European leaders have provided further details about the composition of the withdrawals from Eastern Europe: four of the tank divisions will be removed from East Germany and one each from Czechoslovakia and Hungary. They have also indicated some of the sorts of non-divisional units to be withdrawn as well.

The Gorbachev announcement has been followed by a spate of reports from Eastern Europe concerning reduction of those countries' forces. Chiefly, these have consisted of manpower cuts. But both East Germany and Czechoslovakia have also announced tank reductions--600 and 800, respectively. The Poles have indicated plans to disband two tank divisions and to reduce the readiness of two other divisions to low levels.

#### **IMPORTANT FEATURES**

In my view, the most important features of the cuts are:

- First, the announcement that 5,300 tanks will be withdrawn from Eastern Europe, plus 1,400 tanks from East European armies. This is roughly half the Soviet tanks in Eastern Europe. If

all these tanks come out of combat units, not out of storage, the structure of Soviet forces in Eastern Europe would be substantially altered. The balance between infantry and armor in Soviet ground forces in that area would be brought more into line with the structure of Western armies. It is difficult to imagine that such a major restructuring of the Soviet Army in Eastern Europe would not ultimately lead to a restructuring of the entire Soviet Army. Thus, the 5,300 tank reduction could be a down payment on a major restructuring of the Soviet Army, perhaps giving it the more "defensive" orientation that Gorbachev says he seeks.

- Second, the force reduction of 10,000 and 8,500 artillery pieces in Eastern Europe and the western USSR. According to NATO estimates, these would reduce Soviet tank and artillery levels in this region by about a quarter. These cuts are also consistent with a major restructuring of the Soviet Army.<sup>2</sup>
- Third, the removal of six tank divisions, of which four would come from the GDR. The specification of the withdrawal of forward-deployed units assures the West that at least some of the reductions will come from units that most directly threaten the Federal Republic of Germany.

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<sup>2</sup>I do not view the 800 aircraft cut as significant because the Soviets have large numbers of obsolete aircraft.

#### **MILITARY IMPLICATIONS**

However, at this point, a number of questions remain unanswered-- questions that introduce uncertainties into the assessment of the military implications of the force cuts.

- The first question involves the reduction of 5,300 tanks from Eastern Europe. The combat units that have been designated for withdrawal (six tank divisions and a handful of smaller units) only contain about 2,300 tanks, leaving about 3,000 tanks unaccounted for. As I have just indicated, if these cuts all come from combat units, a major restructuring of the Soviet armed forces would seem to be underway. However, if most or all of these tanks were to come out of storage, the significance of the withdrawal would be much reduced. At this stage, we cannot be sure that they will not come out of storage.
- The second question concerns the reduction of 8,500 artillery pieces from the western USSR and Eastern Europe. It is noteworthy that the Soviets have not indicated specific numbers of artillery pieces from Eastern Europe, as they have for tanks. Of course, several hundred artillery pieces are contained in the six tank divisions. But beyond that implied reduction, they have said nothing equivalent to the designation of 5,300 tanks from Eastern Europe. This omission suggests the possibility that the restructuring of the Soviet Army will not involve sharp artillery cuts. A key feature of the Soviet

ground force build-up since the mid-1960s was the introduction of self-propelled artillery and a three-fold increase in artillery holdings. Thus, there are ample stores of old towed artillery tubes that could be discarded as part of the 8,500 reduction. This absence of explicit mention of artillery in the East European reduction suggests the possibility that Soviet military doctrine would still feature a breakthrough strategy that relies on artillery fire to punch holes in NATO's defensive line, which would be exploited by motorized infantry, helicopters, and the remaining tanks.

- The third and related question concerns the composition and geographical distribution of the reductions of 10,000 tanks and 8,500 artillery pieces. Simply put, if these reductions come from combat units in the westernmost part of European Russia, their military significance will be far higher than if they come either from storage or from rearward areas of European Russia, such as around Moscow and the Urals.
- The final important question of uncertainty concerns the manpower reduction. Although the Soviets have told us the rough geographical distribution of the 500,000 man cut, we do not know what sort of troops will be reduced. This matters because some kinds of cuts--those from combat units--could lower Soviet combat readiness. On the other hand, cuts in service support and overhead functions could have minimal impact. Another important question surrounds the 50,000 men to be withdrawn from Eastern Europe. By my reckoning, the withdrawals already announced--six tank divisions and other

associated units, plus the 5,300 tanks, should have led to a reduction well in excess of 50,000 men, perhaps as high as 100,000. This discrepancy could have many causes, one of which would be a decision to increase the manning levels, and therefore the readiness, of the combat units that will remain after the withdrawals.

It is possible that the Soviets themselves do not know the answers to some or all of these questions. It seems that the cuts were imposed by Gorbachev on the military, which is now left with the task of drawing up the detailed implementation plan. These details affect the assessment of the military implications. Moreover, from the Western point of view, the uncertainties could be compounded by the turmoil that will be introduced into our data base by the large-scale movement and disbandment of units. The West's understanding of Warsaw Pact force structure and force levels is painstakingly built over many years. If our data base is thrown into chaos, it will be very difficult for the West to resolve for itself the questions that I have just discussed. In such circumstances, it would be understandable for Western suspicions to grow. After all, the unilateral Soviet withdrawal of one division from East Germany in 1980 actually led to an increase of Soviet forces there.

The uncertainties could be largely dispelled if the Soviets offered us the ability to monitor the force reductions closely. It is already heartening that President Gorbachev has hinted at the possibility of some monitoring of the force cuts and that the Soviets have already designated which divisions will be withdrawn from East Europe. But much more would help us a lot--designation of all the combat units to be cut

and the ability to observe the withdrawals and the destruction of equipment first hand.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONVENTIONAL BALANCE**

Let me turn now to the implications of the cuts for our assessment of the conventional balance in Central Europe. Western analysts commonly assess this in terms of mobilization scenarios--these specify the amount of time available to each side to prepare for conflict before the Warsaw Pact attacks. There are at least two generic classes of scenarios--the short mobilization scenario (sometimes called short warning or "surprise attack") in which Warsaw Pact force are prepared for conflict in a matter of days, and longer mobilization scenarios in which Warsaw Pact forces have ten days or more to get ready.

The cuts already announced will make the *short mobilization scenario* even more implausible than it is now. Today, there would be large risks for the Warsaw Pact if it tried such an attack plan. The initial Warsaw Pact attack would be mounted by some or all of the 57 Warsaw Pact divisions currently forward deployed in Central Europe. These would not have had time to increase combat readiness and would not be augmented by large Soviet reinforcements from the western USSR until after the outbreak of conflict. Thus, success would depend on catching NATO off guard: in the event surprise failed and NATO mobilized and prepared for defense, the Warsaw Pact plan could easily fail. By withdrawing six divisions and 5,000 tanks from Eastern Europe, not to mention the force reductions that the East Europeans have announced, the Warsaw Pact would rely on even smaller forces than today to mount such a short warning attack. Thus, the plausibility of these scenarios will decline further once the cuts are carried out.

Because I have long found the short mobilization scenarios implausible, my own assessments of the balance have focused on *longer warning scenarios* in which the Warsaw Pact has time to reinforce Eastern Europe with forces from the western Soviet Union. Once such a reinforcement has taken place, the Warsaw Pact would have the capacity to launch a large-scale offensive. Clearly, the announced withdrawals from Eastern Europe would have less impact on these scenarios, since the six withdrawn tank divisions are only a small part of the 100-140 divisions that could be returned to Eastern Europe as part of the reinforcement potentially available in these scenarios.

From the standpoint of this scenario, the most important aspect of the announced reductions is the elimination of 10,000 tanks and 8,500 artillery pieces from the overall Soviet force structure in the western part of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It is here that the uncertainties play a large role. If we make a favorable assumption that the reductions are taken in a balanced way--equally apportioned geographically and by weapon type--so that modern as well as older equipment is included, and so that forces in the westernmost part of European Russia share equally in the cuts, then the military significance is large. To be more concrete, in a previous analysis, my colleagues and I have estimated that roughly 20 to 30 "equivalent divisions"<sup>3</sup> would have to be eliminated from Eastern Europe and the western USSR in order to meet NATO security objectives. Using the favorable assumption, my back-of-the-envelope estimate is that the cuts

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<sup>3</sup>Roughly 25-40 actual divisions.

announced by the Soviets and their East European allies would go one-third to one-halfway toward meeting NATO's needs. Thus, the cuts would still leave the Warsaw Pact with the capacity to mount a successful large-scale offensive, but the Pact's margin would have been reduced.

However, it must be stressed that this estimate is based upon favorable assumptions. If unfavorable assumptions are made--that the cuts are taken from old, stored equipment and come from the eastern portion of European Russia--then the effect of the reductions would be practically nil. This underscores the vital importance of learning more about how the Soviets intend to take these cuts.

#### **POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Let me turn finally to the political implications. These appear already more far reaching than the military implications I have just described.

To East Europeans, the Soviets have sent a major political signal, implying that military power may play a lesser role in future political affairs and perhaps that the Soviet Union is loosening its grip on those nations. If this turns out to be true, we can only welcome the development of growing East European independence from the USSR. However, we must also be mindful of the latent political instability in Eastern Europe and be concerned that a perceived, but not actual, loosening of the Soviet grip could stimulate major instabilities, reaction and violence.

Although even under favorable assumptions, the cuts do not eliminate the Warsaw Pact potential to launch a large-scale offensive against the West, and although there are major uncertainties about the

cuts, the Soviets are reaping substantial political benefit from the announcements in the West. The public perception of a Soviet threat has plummeted, especially in Western Europe and especially in the Federal Republic of Germany. This has certainly made it more difficult for NATO to reach a decision to modernize the aging Lance short-range theater nuclear missile. More important, the decline in threat perception may make it more difficult for Western leaders to resist political pressures to reduce their own conventional forces unilaterally.

It would be unfortunate were NATO to start cutting its forces now in response to the announced Warsaw Pact cuts. Even with favorable assumptions, substantial Warsaw Pact capability will remain. NATO forces are already spread thin, with barely enough to cover the front in Central Europe. Unilateral cuts could shave or even eliminate that already thin margin. From a military standpoint, NATO cannot afford to cut until Warsaw Pact forces are reduced much more. This is the basis for NATO's proposal that both sides' forces be reduced to the equal levels of tanks, artillery, and armored troop carriers. It would be preferable for NATO to hold this position and let the political and economic forces in the East that have led to the Warsaw Pact announcements continue to work their way. Most experts agree that the economic crisis in the Soviet Union is propelling Gorbachev to reduce the burden of defense and to seek--at least temporarily--to curtail the political and military competition with the West.

These political and economic forces have substantially increased the prospects for a successful outcome to conventional arms negotiations. Progress in this area has been blocked because of Soviet unwillingness to eliminate its force advantages. President Gorbachev's

announcement has changed this picture. It now seems possible that the two sides can negotiate an arms control agreement along the lines that NATO is seeking. The prospects for such an outcome, which would also imply a new and less competitive political relationship between East and West, are higher than any moment in post-war history.

