

RAND Strategy Assessment Center

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR OPERATIONAL ARMS CONTROL IN CENTRAL EUROPE

INTRODUCTION

Most discussion of conventional arms control focuses on “structural measures,” which affect force size and composition. A recent study by Paul K. Davis concludes, however, that the approach taken in the CFE talks (Negotiations on Conventional Forces in Europe) between NATO and Warsaw Pact nations should integrate structural and “operational” measures, the latter covering issues such as the readiness, positioning, and operations of forces. In the study, which was sponsored by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and conducted within RAND’s National Defense Research Institute, Dr. Davis concluded that *operational arms control measures have the potential to substantially improve NATO’s military security*. This potential has gone largely unappreciated in the past because operational measures have been seen as “political” measures of a sort best dealt with in ancillary CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) negotiations rather than the mainstream CFE negotiations. Also, to fully appreciate operational measures, we must adopt the viewpoint of a Pact military planner evaluating alternative invasion concepts; operational measures could greatly increase the perceived risks to such an attack planner.

APPROACH

Background

The background for the study was previous work on the military balance by Dr. Davis and colleague Robert Howe, who used analytic war gaming to examine a broad range of scenarios; the conclusion was that the balance would shift substantially if the Soviet Union raised the readiness levels of the reserve forces that constitute half or more of its force structure. They went on to suggest arms control constraints on such reserve-force readiness. In the current study Dr. Davis examined

more generally the problem of how to use “operational measures” as part of an integrated approach to conventional arms control. His emphasis was entirely on improving NATO’s military security rather than on other objectives such as building confidence or avoiding misunderstandings in crisis. Indeed, the study took the viewpoint that NATO’s paramount objective should be to improve stability by improving the defender’s actual and perceived warfighting prospects.

An Arms Control Strategy

In considering how to move from this paramount objective to an arms control strategy employing operational measures, Dr. Davis focused on NATO vulnerabilities that would allow the PACT forces to mount a short-mobilization attack and catch NATO “by surprise” (i.e., “unprepared”). Surprise attacks are important in Soviet military doctrine, and indeed to any would-be attacker seeking early breakthroughs, maneuver, and a quick victory rather than a prolonged war of attrition. Preventing early breakthroughs is especially important for NATO because its entire defense strategy depends on holding ground forward: NATO’s terrain is most favorable near the border; much of West Germany’s wealth is relatively close to the border; NATO lacks the depth for classic defenses that initially give up ground for time; and NATO lacks the operational reserves needed to cope with early breakthroughs.

There are two types of short-mobilization attack. In the first, the attacker “rolls out of bed and goes to war,” relying on in-place (first echelon) forces for the breakthroughs and victory. In the second, the attacker begins by making lengthy premobilization preparations assuring him early arrival of a second echelon of reserves, and then he attacks after a short mobilization. Unless the defender has made comparably extensive preparations, and done so cohesively, the result would be another type of “surprise” attack.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ARMS CONTROL STRATEGY

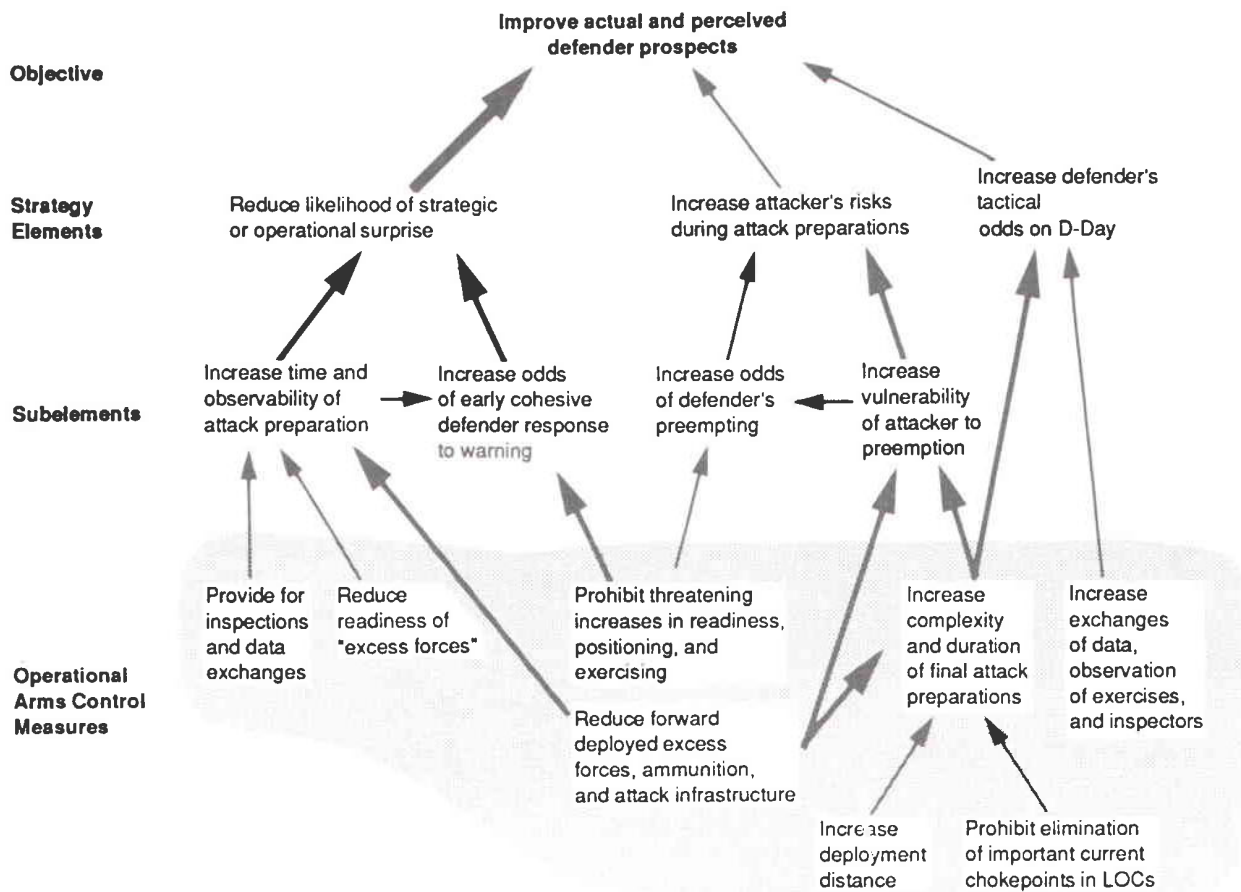
With these considerations in mind, Dr. Davis proposed a general strategy for using operational arms control that would have three key elements:

- **Reduce the threat of “strategic or operational surprise.”** Arms control should prohibit various preparatory attack measures. If the Soviets made such prohibited preparations, NATO would not only have warning indicators, which would probably exist anyway, but would also have strong and unambiguous evidence of *intent* that would greatly increase the likelihood of an early cohesive response.
- **Raise the risks of preparing for attacks** by making the attacker more vulnerable (e.g., to preemptive air strikes) during such preparations. While it may seem ludicrous to consider such preemptive actions by a manifestly defensive alliance that

depends on consensus decisions, the Soviet attack planner would nonetheless be aware of the objective possibilities.

- **Improve NATO’s tactical odds on D-Day.** The likelihood of immediate breakthroughs would be much reduced by increasing the complexity of the attacker’s preparations—i.e., by requiring more and more complex movement of forces and logistics that would increase “friction” generally. This would give the defender a few additional hours of tactical warning that might reduce the likelihood of random defender errors leading to early breakthroughs. Ordinary analyses and war games do not address these issues because they *assume* that attackers and defenders fight, from the start, with high efficiency, despite ample historical evidence to the contrary.

Figure A summarizes the concept pictorially, with arrows indicating how generic types of operational arms control could contribute to the strategy and, eventually, to meeting the objective.



Note: The arrows' thicknesses are in proportion to assessed policy significance

Fig. A—Potential role of operational arms control in improving defender prospects

PRINCIPLES IN DEVELOPING PROPOSALS

Having established an objective and a broad strategy, the next step was to develop more concrete proposals. Recognizing, however, that many well-intentioned proposals for operational arms control could actually damage NATO's defensive prospects, Dr. Davis reviewed a number of considerations that suggest certain principles for developing proposals. The first such principle is "do no harm." With its quantitative inferiority and lack of strategic depth, NATO depends fundamentally on maintaining its forward forces at a high state of readiness and quality. Thus, broad limitations on readiness and exercises should be avoided because they would undercut NATO's strategy and security. Similarly, NATO should avoid measures requiring it to withdraw forces from forward areas because NATO's advantage as the defender consists largely of occupying and preparing in familiar terrain. Also, in a redeployment race NATO would suffer from decentralized control and might find its redeployment exceedingly ragged, which would leave it vulnerable to breakthroughs.

A second important principle in developing proposals is to maintain the "operational minimum" of forces needed for initial defense. In a stable force posture, *both* sides should have enough high-readiness forces to cover their borders initially and have some reserves to cope with any penetrations. Even if the sides had equal forces overall, "first-attack stability" would probably be reduced rather than increased if the level of forces fell below the operational minimum. Why? Because an attacker achieving early penetrations and momentum can often win a decisive victory before the defender can reorganize, and if the defender has too few forces, early penetrations are virtually certain because of attacker concentration.

If one accepts the principle of an operational minimum, then forces above and beyond that level are, in a sense, "excess." A corollary of the operational minimum principle is that forces in excess of that minimum can (and should) be eliminated. First, excess forces should be withdrawn from forward areas. Then, they should be reduced in readiness and, indeed, eliminated from force structure. Similar measures should reduce attack infrastructure (e.g., excess forward deployed stocks of artillery ammunition).

INTEGRATING OPERATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL ARMS CONTROL

With an objective, a broad strategy, and some principles to guide moving from broad strategy to proposals, the study suggests an idealized three-phase approach for integrating operational and structural arms control. The first phase would define principles and methods. The second phase (see Fig. B) would involve large-scale withdrawals of Soviet forces, the withdrawn forces being at least relegated to low states of readiness, and preferably

disbanded and equipment destroyed. The third phase would reduce forces to common ceilings, destroying most excess forces.

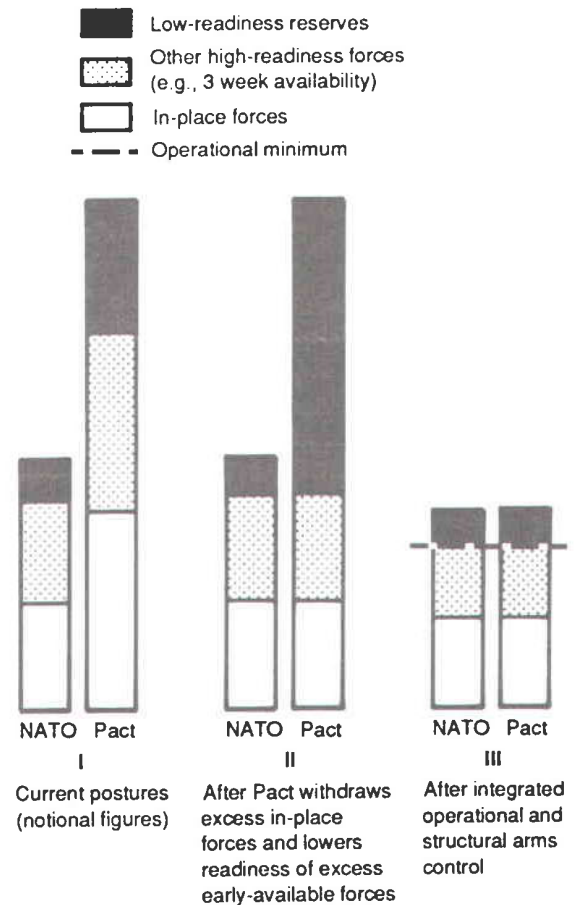


Fig. B—A possible sequence of operational and structural arms control

Phase Two would depend primarily on Soviet actions, the Soviet Union withdrawing forces and infrastructure primarily as a matter of self-interest to reduce military costs, improve relations with the West, and encourage Western investment in the Soviet Union. None of these measures for withdrawing and demobilizing excess forces would undercut Soviet security. After Phase Two, however, NATO's security would be substantially improved, and NATO would be in a better position to agree to significant coordinated reductions, including those from tactical air forces. Phase Three would effect those coordinated reductions, which would involve destruction of considerable ground-force equipment.

It would be unfortunate if Phase Two constituted an outcome because the large asymmetry of force structure would remain and the Pact could reconstitute a favorable posture and an attack capability in a period of months rather than years. Hence, the study concluded

that NATO should define the goals of Phase Three early. Further, it would be desirable if the phasing were less pure than in Figure B, incorporating a mix of Phase Two and Phase Three activities from the very start. Indeed, that appears increasingly feasible as the result of Gorbachev's unilateral initiative and the initial discussions in the CFE negotiations, all of which occurred after the study was completed.

Finally, of course, there is the question of what the operational minimum of ground forces should be. That is a subject of intense ongoing analysis by all the nations participating in the CFE negotiations. This study suggests that the minimum is on the order of 25-35 "equivalent divisions," where "equivalent division" counts depend primarily on attack-capable firepower. It may be that the outcome will be 35-40 divisions, but with larger mobile-infantry components and smaller components of tanks and artillery than today's divisions.

CONCLUSION

If conventional arms control included the operational measures discussed in the study, the threat of a

standing-start Soviet invasion would be greatly decreased because of the reduced level of forward-deployed forces and attack infrastructure. The threat of a short-mobilization attack after a lengthy period of premobilization preparations would also be substantially decreased. A Pact commander would have to either forgo preparations, thereby decreasing his odds of success, or make preparations in violation of clear agreements, thereby providing NATO with both warning and unambiguous evidence of hostile intent. To be sure, negotiating the measures in question will not be easy because of problems concerning definition, verification, and other matters. Nonetheless, the ideal time to negotiate such limitations is now, when the Soviet Union is interested in stability and good relations. A different regime in the future may have different intentions.

(Since the study's completion in November 1988, the Soviet Union announced significant unilateral reductions and both sides put forth ambitious phased proposals in Vienna. These proposals call for parity at lower force levels but do not yet address many of the issues highlighted in this study.)

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Davis, Paul K. *Toward a Conceptual Framework for Operational Arms Control in Europe's Central Region*, The RAND Corporation, R-3704-USDP, November 1988.

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