# Exploiting the Soviet "threat" to Europe

*Support for a European version of Star Wars is based on unreliable evaluations of the Soviet threat and should be abandoned in favor of reducing conventional and nuclear forces.*

*by Matthew Evangelista*

IN THE WAKE of the Reykjavik summit, the most controversial item on the U.S. security agenda, the future of the Strategic Defense Initiative, has become tied even more closely than before to perceptions of Soviet strategy for war in Europe, especially conventional war. Although the relationship between SDI and Soviet conventional forces may not be obvious, a major link is found in proposals for a NATO version of Star Wars—the "European Defense Initiative," which includes an anti-tactical-missile defense system (ATM).

The European Defense Initiative has been justified largely as a necessary response to the deployment of Soviet short-range ballistic missiles armed with conventional warheads. These weapons, the argument holds, are or soon will become so accurate that they could destroy important NATO targets at the outset of a conventional invasion. Therefore, NATO needs anti-tactical-missile defenses to deter or defend against such a Soviet attack. Among the most prominent advocates of such a program are West German Defense Minister Manfred Wörner and the NATO commander, General Bernard Rogers.

The Soviet short-range missiles in question are "dual capable"—that is, they may be armed with either nuclear or conventional warheads. But NATO and Reagan Administration officials who are promoting the new anti-tactical-missile program have given their own brand of dual-capability to the Soviet missiles: if nuclear-armed, they provide a rationale for rejecting Soviet nuclear arms control proposals; on the other hand, the missiles' conventional capability supposedly justifies deploying new NATO conventional forces and a European Star Wars.

IN ORDER TO EVALUATE the claim that Europe needs a defensive system against conventional missile attack, one must review competing Western interpretations of the evolution of Soviet strategy. Fear of a Soviet conventional invasion of Western Europe has served as a primary rationale for the development of U.S. military power in the postwar period. The U.S. monopoly on atomic weapons was justified in the late 1940s as a necessary counter to this possibility, although it is now clear that the threat was exaggerated: postwar demobilization had substantially reduced the size of the Soviet armies, and even contemporary observers recognized that the Soviet Union was in no condition to precipitate another war so soon after the disaster of World War II. Yet much of U.S. security policy, including the formation of NATO and the extensive reliance on nuclear weapons, was based on just such a threat.

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During the second half of the 1950s, when the Soviet Union first widely deployed nuclear weapons with its forces, Western analysts believed that a war in Europe would be nuclear from the start. This view was reinforced by the nature of Soviet deployments, by the statements of Soviet leaders, and by the assumption that the U.S. policy of massive retaliation—which dictated the wide-scale use of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons from the outset of a war—had a Soviet counterpart.

But perceptions of Soviet conventional capabilities continued to exert great influence on U.S. policy. During the early 1960s, for example, the Kennedy administration found that previous administrations had exaggerated the Soviet conventional threat and underestimated NATO's ability to counter it. This reevaluation of Soviet conventional strength contributed to the replacement of the massive retaliation policy by one of flexible response that envisaged a conventional phase and "graduated escalation" to nuclear war. Later, astute observers of Soviet military developments called attention to indications of a new Soviet emphasis on conducting conventional operations in Europe. The Warsaw Pact's "Dnepr" exercises of September 1967 were cited as evidence, and the next year's invasion of Czechoslovakia demonstrated how Soviet conventional forces might be used in a wider war. Qualitative and quantitative improvements in Soviet forces reinforced impressions of a serious Soviet interest in planning for the conventional warfare contingency.

The virtual consensus among Western analysts on Soviet thinking about war in Europe was broken during the mid-1970s, when a number of analysts began to believe that the Soviets would prefer to use only conventional weapons in a war in Europe. They argued that the Soviets were restructuring their forces, especially their tactical air forces, to be able to fight a war without escalating to nuclear weapons.[1] Other observers disagreed, holding to the previous interpretation that "an in-depth, massive, surprise, nuclear strike, in conjunction with immediate, high-speed air and ground exploitation, is still the Soviet concept for war against NATO."[2]

By the early 1980s, a preponderance of evidence argued against the view that the Soviets based their military planning primarily on the immediate, massive use of nuclear weapons in Europe. Indeed, a number of analysts suggested that not only did the Soviets prefer to keep a war in Europe

below the nuclear threshold, but that a central goal of their conventional operations would be the destruction of NATO nuclear forces before they could be used. In this light, the Soviet pledge of June 1982 not to be the first to use nuclear weapons—while certainly made with an eye to public relations—is consistent with Soviet military policy. At least one Soviet military officer has called attention to the notion that such a pledge "objectively" renders strong conventional forces more important and necessary for "the task of preventing a military conflict from growing into a nuclear one."[3]

This is not to say that the Soviets forswear planning for possible nuclear war in Europe. On the contrary, their recent deployments of missiles and artillery with nuclear capability indicate that they want to be prepared to use such weapons in the event that NATO escalates to nuclear use. The main argument is that if war broke out the Soviets would try to prevent such escalation by disarming NATO nuclear forces through the use of conventional forces.

TWO POINTS MUST be made about this presumed Soviet strategy: its prospects for success are rather dubious, and Soviet attempts to implement such a strategy could have dire consequences for crisis stability.

The conventional forces that Western analysts believe the Soviets would employ to prevent NATO's use of nuclear weapons include tactical air forces, short-range ballistic missiles, and forward detachments of combined-arms forces (tanks, helicopters, artillery)—the so-called Operational Maneuver Groups (OMGs). There is considerable controversy, however, over how successful Soviet attempts to disarm NATO nuclear forces would be. The most thorough study of the Soviet air threat to Europe, for example, has found the Soviets incapable of mounting an "independent air operation" that could reliably prevent NATO nuclear retaliation.[4] Two U.S. Defense Department officials have written that "even in Warsaw Pact assessments, the OMG has a very low probability of success (or even survival) in a hostile air environment."[5] Even those who call attention to the potential use of Soviet short-range ballistic missiles against NATO nuclear assets still write mainly in the conditional and future tenses, referring to an "emerging threat."

Regardless of how successful the operations themselves might be, however, the need for quick, early successes in such a strategy would put pressure on the Soviets to initiate military action if war seemed imminent. NATO commanders, in turn, would feel pressed to use their nuclear weapons before losing them to Soviet conventional attack. Finally, the Soviet missiles could be armed with either conventional or nuclear munitions—leading NATO forces to fear a nuclear attack at any time. In this way, one could foresee a fairly rapid escalation from crisis to nuclear war.

Most proposals that have been put forward to deal with these developments in Soviet conventional strategy would probably only exacerbate the situation. Indeed, some observers have suggested that the Western proposals merely use the Soviet developments as pretexts. In the case of the Operational Maneuver Groups, for example, even some Defense Department analysts have criticized the "sensationalization of the OMG" that "has distorted analysis and inhibited a balanced assessment of a complex problem." They suggest that the "defense community in the West has found

in the OMG a novel instrument by which to justify military requirements" for weapons and strategies that are actually desired for other reasons.[6] Other analysts have rightly called into question the novelty of OMGs, noting that similar operational concepts were favored by Soviet military figures such as M.N. Tukhachevskii and V.K. Triandafillov as early as the 1920s and 1930s, and indeed go much further back in Russian military history.[7]

One gets the impression that the "new OMG threat" has been used by U.S. and NATO officials in order to justify strategies such as "air-land battle," "follow-on forces attack," and the advanced-technology "deep-strike" weapons that go along with them. Yet giving NATO a more offensive orientation and putting a premium on the early or preemptive use of its own dual-capable, long-range weapons would not alleviate the problems that Soviet strategy poses for crisis stability. Two wrongs do not make a right.

The same criticisms apply to plans to deploy anti-tactical-missile systems as part of a European Defense Initiative. First of all, how realistic is the threat? Analysts who have raised the specter of Soviet conventional ballistic-missile attacks focus on two factors: the "high accuracy" of the new weapons and the improved effectiveness of their conventional warheads. Neither factor can be analyzed independently because the U.S. government holds a monopoly on the relevant intelligence information. Even the author whose work is most frequently mentioned as evidence of the new Soviet threat cites as his source on Soviet missile accuracy only a couple of government leaks to the *Washington Times*—not the most reliable source of military data.[8] Given the uneven record of U.S. intelligence analysis of Soviet ballistic missile accuracy, one should in any case treat these new claims with some caution. Information on Soviet conventional munitions is equally scarce.

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Information provided by the U.S. government on Soviet ballistic missiles deployed in Europe has been contradictory and unreliable. At first the threat was described as a "new generation" of nuclear-capable missiles, given the Western designations SS-21, SS-22, and SS-23 (having estimated ranges, respectively, of 120, 900, and 500 kilometers). Later Defense Department analysts decided that the SS-22 missile was merely a modification of the older SS-12. The name SS-22 is no longer officially used by the Defense Department, although it continues to appear in the nongovernmental debate over Soviet strategy. The weapon's characteristics remain in dispute. The SS-12 has commonly been described as deployed only with nuclear warheads. Recently, however, a U.S. military official has tried to imply that the weapon could have a conventional capability. He writes that the modification has "the same range as the basic SS-12 but with improved accuracy, which would make it effective with conventional, as well as nuclear warheads."[9] On the basis of such uncertain information, it is difficult to evaluate the true extent of the threat posed by Soviet short-range ballistic missiles.

Even if the new Soviet weapons were as capable as some Western observers claim, they could not in themselves give the Soviets any assurance of disarming NATO's nuclear forces in a preemptive strike. The Soviets would have to count on nearly simultaneous destruction of hundreds of targets, including launchers, nuclear storage sites, air bases, and command, control, and communication facilities. The numbers of new-generation missiles are still too few to cover even a nominal set of NATO nuclear targets. Even combined missile and air strikes could not reliably prevent nuclear retaliation, especially considering the virtually invulnerable submarine-based nuclear weapons that the United States, Britain, and France could launch in response to such an attack.

Despite the dubious prospects for a successful disarming strike by Soviet short-range missiles, NATO officials have used this threat to justify a program of antimissile defenses. They have also expressed concern about the vulnerability of NATO air bases to a Soviet conventional missile attack. NATO commander Rogers, it should be remembered, had previously embarked on a campaign to sell deep-strike strategies and weapons to the Allies, on the basis of the Soviet "OMG threat." Some NATO observers have posited similar motives to a series of briefings and articles prepared by American analysts and evidently designed to encourage European interest in antitactical missiles. Calling attention to the fact that some of the most prominent analysts happen to work for Washington-area firms that engage in military research for the U.S. government, one observer said, "It sounds a bit like the beltway bandits trying to sell a cure."[10]

In discussing the variety of "cures" available, one analyst argues that "NATO faces hard choices over whether active, passive, or a combination of defensive measures would best cope with the threat of new short-range missiles." Ironically, the author chooses the anti-tactical-missile cure after seemingly rejecting such alternatives as deep-strike attacks against Soviet missile launchers. He uses arguments similar to those presented here: such offensive strategies "could heighten the risks of war during crises for the same reasons that Soviet missiles do" and could "create strong hair-trigger incentives for pre-emptive attack." "By comparison," he argues, "tactical ballistic missile defenses of the non-nuclear variety are more consistent with the historic premise that NATO is a purely defensive military alliance."[11]

What proponents of "defensive" ATMs fail to recognize is that such weapons, in combination with NATO's arsenal of offensive nuclear forces and ongoing plans for deep-strike weapons and strategies, do not appear so benign to the Soviets. The arguments here are analogous to those made against Star Wars: any defensive system that can provide

some protection against a first strike could be even more effective against a retaliatory second strike. In Soviet perceptions, NATO might be tempted during a period of intense crisis to launch a first strike with nuclear and conventional weapons, anticipating that its defenses could destroy whatever surviving Soviet weapons were launched in retaliation. Such a situation could again provide the Soviets with "hair-trigger incentives" to preempt.

CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT from the range of solutions put forward recently to deal with the potential future threat of Soviet conventionally armed, short-range ballistic missiles is any mention of arms control.[12] The sweeping proposals advanced by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev over the past year suggest that the prospect of an arms control solution to European security problems should not be ignored. Even U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz termed Gorbachev's Iceland proposals "breathtaking." Many of the Soviet offers concerning European security related directly to the issue of short-range ballistic missiles.

The Soviet proposal that attracted most attention in the West was the decision to accept the U.S. "zero option" for medium-range nuclear forces in Europe: removing all SS-20s (with an estimated range of 5,000 kilometers) targeted on Europe in return for U.S. withdrawal of Pershing II and cruise missiles. The Soviets agreed not to include British and French forces or U.S. "forward-based" nuclear-capable aircraft as part of such an agreement. Although this proposal was quite popular among West European governments when the United States advanced it in November 1981, the same governments then expressed concern when the Soviets finally accepted it. The West German government in particular maintained that even without the SS-20s, the Soviets could strike NATO countries with short-range ballistic systems such as the SS-12, SS-21, and SS-23.

This West German criticism received considerable attention in the Western press. By contrast, the Soviet response was hardly noticed. In his speech to the twenty-seventh congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February 1986, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze promised that "if U.S. medium-range missiles in Europe are liquidated, there will no longer be any need to keep Soviet operational-tactical missiles where they have been deployed." In April, Gorbachev also proposed reducing short-range ballistic missile systems in the context of a broader proposal for European disarmament, including cuts of 100,000 to 150,000 in personnel and reductions in tactical air forces.[13]

One could argue that the Soviet proposals are intended primarily for their public-relations effect. Even if this were the case, however, there is no reason not to test Soviet seriousness. Yet both U.S. and NATO officials have been oddly reluctant to pursue Soviet initiatives that could reduce the threat of ballistic missiles in Europe, preferring to emphasize the threat rather than the prospects for alleviating it. NATO officials point to the *nuclear* aspect of the Soviet short-range missiles in order to denigrate Soviet acceptance of the zero option. The same officials stress the *conventional* role of the Soviet missiles when it is a question of justifying NATO conventional defense programs, and ATMs, along with improved air defenses, have been promoted as a natural part of conventional-force modernization.

It is short-sighted and irresponsible to neglect Soviet arms control initiatives in favor of new NATO military programs. While the prospects for a "grand compromise" in arms control—U.S. affirmation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in return for deep cuts in Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles—do not appear great, agreements on European security seem more promising. In fact, the only arms control accord successfully negotiated under the Reagan Administration provides important precedents for future agreements. The "confidence-building" measures adopted at the Stockholm Conference on Disarmament in Europe entail limitations on military exercises and aerial inspection of Soviet territory. Another important precedent was set when the Soviets accepted extensive on-site verification measures in an effort to gain U.S. adherence to a comprehensive nuclear test ban.[14]

For these reasons, Gorbachev's proposals for reducing conventional forces, tactical nuclear forces, and short-range ballistic missiles should be taken seriously and should certainly be pursued. They offer the prospect of simultaneously limiting the nuclear and conventional capabilities of Soviet forces, and would render unnecessary the costly and dangerous programs to develop ATMs and deep-strike weapons. Arms control is surely a better approach to reducing the Soviet offensive conventional threat to Europe than plans for a NATO conventional buildup or a European Star Wars. □

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3. N. Tetekin, "Glavnyi pokazatel' kachestvennogo sostoianiia voisk" [The main index of the qualitative state of the forces], *Krasnaia zvezda* [Red Star], Nov. 10, 1982.
4. Joshua M. Epstein, *Measuring Military Power: The Soviet Air Threat to Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).
5. John G. Hines and Phillip A. Peterson, "The Warsaw Pact Strategic Offensive: the OMG in Context," *International Defense Review,* vol. 16, no. 10 (1983), p. 1391.
6. Ibid.
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8. Dennis M. Gormley, "A New Dimension to Soviet Theater Strategy," *Orbis*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Fall 1985), p. 567.
9. Kerry L. Hines, "Soviet Short-Range Ballistic Missiles: Now a Conventional Deep-Strike Mission," *International Security,* vol. 18, no. 12 (1985), p. 1913.
10. An unnamed "expert," quoted in Chalmers Hardenbergh, ed., *The Arms Control Reporter* (Brookline, Mass.: Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies, 1986), p. 575.B.153.
11. Gormley, pp. 538, 567.
12. A notable exception is Thomas Risse-Kappen, "SDI and West German Security: Positions and Issues," paper prepared for a meeting of the Aspin Institute, Sept. 7–10, 1986, Cambridge, Mass.
13. *Arms Control Reporter,* pp. 403.B.371, 401.B.114.
14. For a discussion of the Soviet proposals, see Matthew Evangelista, "The New Soviet Approach to Security," *World Policy Journal,* vol. 3, no. 4 (Fall 1986).