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MUTUAL BALANCED FORCE REDUCTION IN EUROPE: THE FORGOTTEN LINKAGE

I. HISTORICAL SURVEY

Despite persistent Soviet claims about their leading role in disarmament initiatives, the historical record clearly shows that, in Europe at least, the NATO alliance has been pressing for arms control and disarmament measures for at least six years prior to the official talks with the Warsaw Pact, which finally started in 1973.

The Harmel Report on NATO's general strategy, approved in December 1967, first mentioned that the Allies were studying disarmament and arms control, "including the possibility of balanced force reductions." In June 1968 the NATO ministers' meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, addressed itself even more urgently to that problem. The ministers directed their permanent representatives to further pursue the work on force reductions in Europe and at the same time called on the Warsaw Pact states to join in that effort.

The Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968 created an unfavorable climate for any East-West negotiations. Moreover, it resulted in permanent stationing of five extra Soviet divisions there, variously estimated at between 80-100,000 men. The justification of the intervention by the so-called "socialist commonwealth" the right to collectively defend the conquests of socialism--indicated inherent difficulties in the search for a force reduction in Central Europe.

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Nevertheless, the NATO Council meeting in Rome, May 1970, again took up the problem of force reduction in Europe and invited interested parties to hold exploratory talks. A NATO meeting in Brussels and the mission of Manlio Brosio to Moscow in 1971 also pursued force reductions. The lack of any response, however, did not discourage the NATO governments. On November 15, 1972, after Dr. Kissinger's September visit to Moscow--where his discussions allegedly linked the CSCE conference to force reduction negotiations (1) they invited the governments of the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and East Germany to begin exploratory talks in Geneva on eventual MBFR negotiations.

The Warsaw Pact countries took their time in formally replying to the NATO proposals. In a Soviet note handed to twelve NATO representatives on January 18, 1973, their counter-proposal suggested, however, that the exploratory talks should be opened to all interested countries and held in Vienna, not in Geneva. The NATO governments, in their eagerness to preserve the parallel linkage of the force reduction negotiations with the CSCE talks already in progress, acquiesced to the change of site and set the date for exploratory talks for January 31.

II. THE EXPLORATORY TALKS

The topic for discussion which dragged on for weeks was settlement of the first procedural step: agreement on which countries would participate. Initially, the Western powers proposed concentrating on reducing forces in Central Europe and limiting the number of participants to seven NATO countries: U.S., Great Britain, West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Canada; and five Warsaw Pact countries: USSR, GDR, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia. Other countries were to be admitted as interested observers.

The Soviet note pressed for the inclusion at the minimum, of Bulgaria and Rumania. At the maximum it asserted that the composition of the preparatory meeting should not preclude the right of other countries to become parties to the agreement or agreements of force reductions, thus leaving the door open for other countries to join the talks later. NATO rejected this suggestion.

The next Soviet countermove was to propose that Hungary's status should be reduced from a full-fledged participant to observer

(1)

See William Safire, "Super Yalta", New York Times, July 28, 1975, p. 2. Also, Hedrick Smith, "Soviet Seen Stalling on Troop Cuts to Break Link to Security Talks", New York Times, May 6, 1973.

status, thus excluding some 40,000 Soviet troops stationed there from negotiated reductions. Otherwise, the Soviet delegation argued, all Allied forces stationed in Italy should be included into the overall Western forces subject to reduction.

The issue of Hungary's status, which stalled the preparatory talks, was finally left open, in a sort of compromise, in which Hungary was assigned the status of a special participant, but the West has reserved the right to raise the issue again.

The Soviet delegation also strongly objected to the use of the word "balanced" in the title of the Vienna talks. Balanced reduction is actually a key element in the NATO formula. To create the East-West equilibrium in ground forces as well as weaponry, the Warsaw Pact would have to reduce the size of its armies in an asymmetrical way, since, first of all, its ground forces and armor in the Central European area are considerably larger than NATO. Moreover, as regards reinforcement capability, since the USSR is much closer to the area, it has a significant geographical advantage over the U.S., whose territory is 3,200 miles away.

The Soviet Union has rejected the evidence of imbalance and insisted on "equal security". It suggested a new title for the conference: "Mutual Reductions of Forces and Armaments and Associated Measures in Central Europe" (MURFAAMCE). This wide discrepancy in initial positions did not augur well for the opening of the substantive talks, which began on October 30, 1973, and have been continuing since, in what until now appears to be a solidly stalemated conference.⁽¹⁾

III. THE SUBSTANTIVE TALKS

After the first round, which opened in October and lasted until December 14, 1973, there have been three rounds annually of about ten weeks duration, or about 700 total meeting days.⁽²⁾

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New York Times editorial, June 2, 1974, p. 32.

(2)

The United States delegation consists of the permanent resident, deputy U.S. representative, three senior advisors (representing the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency), the Secretary of the delegation, seven staff officers, eight secretaries and three communicators. The nonpermanent members usually consist of six staff officers and three secretaries. Thus, the United States must provide salaries, accommodations and travel for thirty-three people.

The official title of the conference is negotiations on "The Mutual Reduction of Forces and Armaments and Associated Measures in Central Europe." The NATO delegations still refer to it informally as MBFR or "mutual, balanced force reduction, but already during the exploratory talks, due to the vehement Soviet objections, the Western delegates were compelled to agree to eliminate the word "balanced" from the talk's title. (1) The West consoles itself with the belief that it succeeded in retaining the concept.

The geographical area concerned comprises, on NATO's side, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the Federal Republic of Germany; and on the Warsaw Pact side, the German Democratic Republic, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.

As can be seen from this list of participants in the talks, Hungary is not considered part of Central Europe, again at the insistence of the USSR, despite four Soviet divisions stationed there. The status of Hungary remained open, with Western negotiators reserving the right to raise the question again.

Nevertheless, as of now, Hungary is listed officially in the category of special participants, i.e., countries which do not have forces in Central Europe and would not sign agreements, together with Bulgaria and Rumania from the Warsaw Pact. The NATO special participants are: Denmark, Greece, Italy, Norway, and Turkey.

Thus, the MBFR conference opened with two significant NATO concessions, even though the Western alliance considers them only technical and possibly temporary.

IV. NATO AND WARSAW PACT PROPOSALS

The importance of these concessions (no firm Warsaw Pact commitment to "balanced" reduction and exclusion of Hungary from the Central Europe reduction area) will become even more obvious in discussing the scope of the reductions. According to Western sources, significant disparities exist between the NATO and Warsaw Pact ground and air forces in the Central Europe reduction area. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, the U.S. has about 190,000 troops there and the Soviet Union, 430,000 (plus four Soviet divisions in Hungary, two of them tank divisions). Other NATO forces in

(1)

See C. L. Sulzberger, "No Longer Any B For Balanced", New York Times, July 11, 1973, p. 39.

the region total 529,000 men, while the Soviet Union's allies, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Poland, have 441,000. The State Department MBFR fact sheet offers slightly different figures of 777,000 NATO troops versus 925,000 Warsaw Pact ground force manpower. The disparity, however, remains the same, about 150,000 men. The Warsaw Pact preponderance in armaments is much greater with its 15,500 tanks and 2,770 tactical aircraft stationed in the regions against NATO's 6,000 tanks and 1,220 tactical aircraft. (1)

As for the NATO effort to equalize the disparity by balanced or "assymetrical" reduction, the Soviet reaction at the conference was quite predictable. As early as 1972, a year before the beginning of the Vienna talks, the Soviet official attitude toward force reductions in Europe was frankly discussed in Soviet sources. For instance, World Economics and International Relations carried two articles by Yuriy Kostko in its June and September, 1972, issues. Obviously inspired by the official policy line, the author flatly stated that the Soviet Union rejected various NATO and other Western models, requiring assymetrical redirection of armed forces because of alleged Warsaw Pact superiority in men and armor. His strongly worded clarification of the Soviet position on troop reductions in Europe in substance revealed the Warsaw Pact proposal made after the official opening of the Vienna talks and upheld, with minor changes, throughout the eleven rounds (1973-1977). This proposal is based on the principle of strict parity reduction of foreign and national armed forces within the agreed area and under an agreed deadline. All participating states would pledge to include ground, air forces, and nuclear weapons in all states of reduction.

Stage 1. The U.S., Belgium, Britain, Canada, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands reduce their troops by 20,000 men along with their equipment. Simultaneously, the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia reduce their own troops by 20,000.

Stage 2. Each participating state will reduce its forces by five percent.

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These figures may be obsolete in 1977 because of continued Soviet efforts to bolster its conventional forces in the region. See Drew Middleton, "Soviet Sharpens Forces in Europe," New York Times, April 18, 1976.

Stage 3. A further ten percent reduction on an equal percentage basis will follow.⁽¹⁾

This would amount to approximately seventeen percent reductions of NATO as well as Warsaw Pact forces in three annual stages.

On November 22, 1973, the NATO countries submitted their own proposal, which is based on a set of assumptions and concepts at variance, if not diametrically opposed, to those of the Warsaw Pact. Assuming considerable disparity in ground forces and armor,⁽²⁾ the NATO proposes reductions in two phases.

Phase I. The Soviets would withdraw a tank army of 68,000 soldiers and 1,700 tanks from the area. The United States would withdraw 29,000 soldiers.

Thus, First Phase reductions would affect only the U.S. and Soviet forces stationed in the reduction area. At the same time, both sides would agree on the concept of "common ceiling" in ground force manpower, to be reached at the end of Phase II. The common ceiling is a maximum total -- NATO has suggested it be set at 700,000 soldiers -- which could not be exceeded by either side.

Phase II. The ground forces of direct participants would be reduced to meet the common ceiling.

These two original proposals by NATO and the Warsaw Pact have remained virtually unchanged during the eleven negotiation rounds, despite minor "concessions" on both sides. Thus, the Soviet Union offered to accept higher percentage cuts in its forces stationed in Central Europe as a part of Phase I to meet NATO's suggestion. The U.S. later proposed to withdraw 1,000 tactical nuclear weapons from Western Europe in return for the retirement from Central Europe of a Soviet tank army, normally 1,700 tanks and 65,000 men.

This diplomatic "horsetrading" did very little to bridge the gap between the two proposals. In June 1976, the Warsaw Pact finally provided NATO with figures on its troop strength, which to Western experts appeared too low to represent the factual basis for any troop reduction.

(1)

See V. Viktorov, "At the Vienna Talks", International Life (in Russian), No. 7, 1974, pp. 27-28.

(2)

Intelligence estimates are listed on page 5.

Thus, after more than four years of bargaining in Vienna, both sides are as far apart as when they started, and it requires a considerable degree of optimism to share President Carter's hopes on the MBFR, as expressed in his recent address to the NATO conference in London:

I hope that our countries can also reach agreement with the Soviet Union in limiting and reducing conventional forces. The United States strongly supports the efforts of the alliance to gain an accord on mutual and balanced reduction of forces in Central Europe. That agreement should be based on parity in force levels through overall ceilings for the forces of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet Union, by contrast, seeks to preserve the present conventional imbalance and to impose national force ceilings. I hope that these obstacles can be overcome. MBFR must be a means for achieving mutual security, not for gaining one-sided military advantage.⁽¹⁾

V. SOVIET MBFR AIMS

The question arises as to what are the ulterior motives of the Warsaw Pact and especially Soviet behavior at the Vienna talks. In other words, what are they trying to achieve by their proposals, which are obviously aimed at perpetuating their military superiority? In the opinion of many Western experts, the Warsaw Pact military build-up far surpasses any reasonable defense needs. Many Europeans therefore fear that Soviet military power, ostensibly organized for attack, could be "the basis for political blackmail against weaker members of NATO."⁽²⁾

The specific thrust of the Warsaw Pact negotiators, stubbornly pursued since the opening of the talks, has been well summarized by a NATO spokesman at the end of round X (December 16, 1976):

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New York Times, May 11, 1977, p. A14.

(2)

See Drew Middleton, "Soviet Sharpens Force in Europe", New York Times, April 18, 1976, and "Anxieties About NATO", New York Times, December 10, 1976. See also NATO and the New Soviet Threat, Report of Senators Nunn and Bartlett to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, January 24, 1977.

The East is still calling for equal percentage reductions of all forces and armaments by all direct participants. The East's proposals, if implemented, would contractualize in treaty form the Eastern superiority in soldiers and tanks and other major armaments. The Eastern approach would also impose national ceilings on the post-reduction levels of the forces of every direct participant, thus interfering with NATO's integrated defense system and prejudicing the future organization of Western European defense. (1)

A closer look at the Warsaw Pact stance will reveal that the Soviet Union is using the MBFR talks as a vehicle for promoting its long-standing European policy; namely, to create a "socialist Europe", under Soviet control. To achieve this aim, four main targets have been selected -- primary obstacles to that policy -- the United States presence, NATO, the European Economic Community, and the Federal Republic of Germany.

The substantial weakening or even elimination of U.S. nuclear arms system in Western Europe, which is part of the Soviet reduction model, is aimed not so much at impairing the West European defense system as it is at the uncoupling of the special relationship between the United States and Western Europe. The reduced risk of confrontation with the United States would give Soviet diplomacy much greater leverage for political pressure against individual West European states, backed by overwhelming Soviet conventional military superiority on the continent.

The Soviet proposal strongly emphasizes that mutual force reduction may not be a bloc-to-bloc affair. Hence, its insistence on "national ceilings" for armed forces levels of each direct participant. The Soviet government is apparently also trying to insert clauses in the MBFR agreement which could serve as starting-points for Soviet claims to have a role in NATO political and military decisions, thus exploiting "the inter-imperialist" contradictions.

This approach also serves the Soviet policy of preventing a closer union of West European states through an accelerated integration process, which would give Western Europe its due weight in inter-state relations. Another implication of the "national ceilings" formula seems to be that the West European countries which may decide to cooperate in security matters and merge corresponding facilities would violate the MBFR agreement.

(1)

Release of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency,
p. 3.

One of the primary Soviet objectives for the MBFR negotiations is a decisive reduction of the armed forces of the FRG, ⁽¹⁾ which represents the backbone of West European ground defense forces and which, in case of a conflict, could be given access to U.S. tactical nuclear weapons.

In distinction to the forces of the two superpowers, the military units of the other European participants included in the reduction process would have to be demobilized, which would particularly affect the West German army, the largest component of NATO.

At the end of round XI (April 15, 1977), while still professing official diplomatic optimism, Ambassador Resor, head of the U.S. delegation, gave this sombre summary:

We are disappointed that there has not been more progress in the past round. However, we continue to believe that a basis for progress exists, if the East moves to a more realistic approach which does take account of the real and important differences among the direct participants in these negotiations. The Western approach does this.

In the meantime, round XII has started in Vienna on May 9. While there have been no official Western statements, TASS, the Soviet government press agency, issued a press release on June 3, summarizing the speech by the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic delegation chief, Ambassador G. Meisner.

He stressed the importance of principles of mutual and equal obligations and the necessity of reducing all types of armed forces -- ground as well as air forces -- and units armed with nuclear weapons or capable of acquiring them.

The ambassador also emphasized that:

the direct participants in the negotiations should strictly adhere to the same system and reduce their armed forces by entire units and subunits, together with their weapons and military equipment.

(1)

See Michael Getler, "Cuts in Bonn Army Called Soviet Goal", Washington Post, January 22, 1976, p. A21.

In addition, the Ambassador criticized Western proposals and the general attitude of NATO countries. In the light of the above principles, according to TASS:

he especially objected to the Western model of asymmetrical reductions according to which the socialist states would have to reduce their armed forces three times as much as the West.

He also reiterated:

the timely proposal of the delegations of socialist countries suggesting that direct participants will undertake the obligation of not increasing their armed forces during the negotiations. (1)

Since Ambassador Meisner is a spokesman for the Warsaw Pact participants, his statement indicates that the MBFR negotiations are still as solidly deadlocked as ever.

In view of these Soviet objectives and the unbridgeable gap between the positions taken by the two negotiating camps in Vienna, the question arises whether there is any purpose in continuing these protracted talks. There exists, moreover, a danger that domestic pressures in West Europe or in the U.S. will result in unilateral concessions on NATO's part, an opportunity for which the Soviet Union is patiently waiting.

Written by Charles T. Baroch at the
request of The Heritage Foundation

(1)

See Pravda, June 4, 1977, p. 5.