
Defense Report

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A Cut in Tank Production—It Doesn't Square with Reality

On the 24th of January, 1977 Senators Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Dewey Bartlett (R-Okla.) issued a detailed report on the imbalance in conventional combat power between the Soviet Union and the NATO nations. The Senators concluded the imbalance was now so great that it would be possible for the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies to launch a conventional attack against NATO with little or no preliminary buildup or warning.

One of the reasons given for the conventional war-making gap is the shortage of armored fighting vehicles—tanks, self-propelled artillery and armored personnel carriers—that exists in NATO. The U.S. share of the gap was created by slowed production and by a drawdown of M-60 main battle tanks to supply Israel during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. In the intervening years Soviet tank production has remained at a high level (about 2,770 per year) while the United States has been building a yearly average of just 469 tanks. According to the Nunn/Bartlett report the tank strength of the Warsaw Pact now outnumbers NATO by three to one—and the gap is still widening.

The U.S. Army has requested, the Ford and Carter Administrations have approved and the House of Representatives has passed an authorization to build 859 tanks in Fiscal Year 1978. So it was with considerable puzzlement that the Army learned of a recommended cut of 210 tanks proposed by the Senate Armed Services Committee. Nunn and Bartlett are both influential members of that committee. It was the recipient of their NATO report.

It is true that the Army has a new and better tank in the works but the XM-1, as it is now called, is still several years away from production and more years away from the point at which they will be entering the Army inventory in sizeable numbers. In the meantime the Army had hoped to keep the tank gap from widening too much by continuing production of the M-60, which is considered a match for the latest Soviet tank, the T-72.

The conventional war-fighting gap between NATO and the Warsaw Pact is not the illusion of military empire builders. It is very real. Senators Nunn and Bartlett recognized it. President Carter leaned on it heavily in his recent exhortations to NATO for improved capabilities. Its magnitude may tempt the Soviets into an aggressive adventure. It is unfortunate that the Senate Armed Services Committee chose to overlook all these realities.

We can only hope that during the balance of the legislative process this oversight will be corrected.