

## RESPONDING TO THE GORBACHEV ANNOUNCEMENT

**Mikhail Gorbachev's dramatic announcement last week before the United Nations that he will trim the size of Soviet military forces is already having a political effect in the United States and Western Europe. Whether it ultimately will have a significant effect on the East-West military balance is another matter. As they stand, the troop reductions are encouraging but vague. They still would leave the Soviet bloc with substantial advantages over the U.S. and its NATO allies in the basic tools of modern warfare: tanks, planes, and artillery. In coming months, therefore, the Bush Administration should press Moscow for more detailed information on the cuts, propose at upcoming NATO-Warsaw Pact conventional arms talks even deeper reductions in Soviet forces, and seek to maintain NATO strength and unity in the emotionally charged political climate that Gorbachev's action has created.**

Whatever Gorbachev's intentions, his announcement almost surely is the result of the worsening crisis of Soviet communism. During the 1980s, Moscow's military spending grew to what some experts estimate to be 20 percent of the total economy. The Soviet defense burden apparently has proved too great. Also, American rearmament and support for anti-Soviet liberation movements have denied Moscow the easy gains which its military buildup and interventionist policies had brought in the 1970s. Its empire overextended and its economy sputtering, Moscow apparently is seeking reduced competition with the West. Gorbachev's new strategy may envision a genuine accommodation in which Western security concerns are addressed — or it could seek to advance traditional Soviet hegemonic ambitions by further disorienting and dividing the Western Alliance.

**Asking Hard Questions.** U.S. policy must allow for both possibilities and a range in between. Before anything else, the U.S. should assess soberly Gorbachev's promise to cut 500,000 men from the Soviet armed forces over the next two years. The current strength of Soviet armed forces is estimated at 5,096,000. A declining pool of eligible recruits is making it increasingly difficult for Moscow to maintain a force of this size. The 500,000-man reduction that Gorbachev announced still would leave the Soviet Union with more than twice the number under arms than the U.S. Whether the cuts really do trim Soviet military strength depends on which troops will be eliminated. Will they be combat-ready forces or work and construction brigades?

The U.S. also must assess Gorbachev's disbanding of six tank divisions, withdrawing 50,000 Soviet troops and 5,000 Soviet tanks from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Hungary, and his statement that the remaining front line Soviet forces will shift from an offensive to defensive posture. This change could be the most significant for NATO because it could reduce significantly Moscow's ability to launch a surprise attack. Here too, however, the nature of the

changes will determine their impact. Will the cuts be made primarily in Czechoslovakia and Hungary or from those forces most threatening to NATO: the 19 crack Red Army divisions in East Germany? Will the 5,000 withdrawn tanks simply be restationed in the rear, or will they be put in storage or even destroyed?

**Down Payment on Further Reductions.** Gorbachev also announced that cuts in Soviet forces in Eastern Europe and the European USSR will total 10,000 tanks (including the 5,000 cited above), 8,500 artillery systems, and 800 combat aircraft. Still, the Warsaw Pact will retain an advantage between the Atlantic and the Urals of 2:1 in tanks; 2.5:1 in artillery; and 3:2 in combat aircraft. Gorbachev's cuts, if carried out, should be viewed as a down payment for further asymmetrical reductions to be achieved through negotiation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Also important to watch will be whether the Soviets decommission only older equipment, such as T-54/55 tanks and MiG-23 *Flogger* aircraft, or include such modern weapons as T-80 tanks and MiG-29 *Fulcrum* fighters.

The U.S. should be cautious in responding to the Gorbachev announcement until he specifically identifies which forces are earmarked for reduction. Gorbachev's plans may yet be derailed. And Gorbachev may yet seek concessions from the West before making the cuts, much as he apparently is adding new conditions to the agreement to withdraw all Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

Despite the caveats and need for caution, however, Gorbachev's announcement is an admission that the Soviet Union fields military forces much greater than those required for self-defense and that its conventional forces are the principal source of insecurity in Europe. This important confession must be taken into account at the upcoming conventional arms reduction talks. In the meantime, the Bush foreign policy team, when taking office, should:

◆ ◆ **Press Moscow for more details on the nature and scope of actual cuts.** They could be largely empty or very significant. The West needs more information and tangible signs that reductions are under way.

◆ ◆ **Turn the focus to further reductions through conventional arms control proposals.** This would recapture the initiative and highlight the imbalance of forces that will continue even if the promised cuts are made.

◆ ◆ **Call a NATO summit at which the U.S. would ask the Alliance to set criteria to measure and verify the military impact of the Soviet force reductions.** Such objective criteria should temper the euphoria with which European publics and most political leaders are greeting Gorbachev's speech. Recognizing that this can play into Soviet hands, Bush must ensure that Alliance policy toward Moscow responds to the military situation created by Gorbachev's actions rather than to the political atmosphere created by his speech.

◆ ◆ **Continue U.S. force modernization and opposition to Soviet aggression, which have provided incentives for Gorbachev to begin to reduce his military forces.**

◆ ◆ **State the obvious explicitly: that Gorbachev's cuts do not affect the strategic nuclear balance and should have no immediate bearing on the U.S. position at the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) or on U.S. plans to modernize strategic forces and proceed with the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).**

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