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Soviet Perceptions of Asymmetry in NATO and Warsaw Pact
Tactical Strike Aircraft

The Soviets have claimed repeatedly in recent months that NATO enjoys a quantitative and qualitative advantage in "tactical strike aviation." Some authoritative Soviet spokesmen apply this term to fighter-bombers and ground attack aircraft in general, but other equally authoritative officials apply it solely to dual-capable aircraft--those which can deliver either nuclear or conventional munitions.¹

These statements, made as the mandate talks proceed in Vienna, reflect Soviet concern over the agenda for a new forum of arms control negotiations--the Conventional Stability Talks (CST)--in the Atlantic-to-Urals zone. The Soviets claim that overall parity in conventional forces exists in Europe and strongly imply that reductions in Warsaw Pact tanks will only be acceptable if NATO agrees to reduce its force of tactical strike aircraft.

Our analysis shows that while NATO aircraft are qualitatively superior to Pact aircraft, the number of NATO fighter-bomber and ground attack aircraft exceeds the number of Pact aircraft only if US and Canadian reinforcement aircraft based outside the zone in peacetime are counted.

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Theater Forces Division, Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and questions are welcome and should be directed to Chief, Theater Forces Division, SOVA, 482-9442 or 53432 [redacted]

¹ The Soviets distinguish between fighter bombers and ground attack aircraft based on the types of ground attack missions they perform. Ground attack aircraft are those such as the Soviet SU-25 Frogfoot or the US A-10 that are designed to perform battlefield area interdiction or close air support missions within 30 kilometers of the Forward Line of Own Troops (FLOT). Fighter bombers are designed to conduct not only battlefield area interdiction and close air support but also deep interdiction missions against targets up to several hundred kilometers behind the FLOT.

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Some Soviets, including Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev, Chief of the General Staff, and his most publicly prominent arms control adviser, Colonel General Nikolay Chervov, contend that one of the real asymmetrical advantages favoring NATO resides in dual-capable aircraft. Further, they imply that the term "tactical strike aviation" is synonymous with dual-capable aircraft. [REDACTED]

In the Budapest Appeal of June 1986, the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies called for a mutual, 25 percent reduction of NATO and Pact ground forces and tactical strike aircraft by the early 1990s. In Prague in April 1987, Soviet leader Gorbachev acknowledged the existence of disparities between Pact and NATO forces, but claimed NATO has certain advantages. Since then various Soviet officials have consistently claimed NATO has an advantage over the Pact in tactical strike aircraft and have suggested that an agreement be reached in CST in which NATO would reduce tactical strike aircraft in return for reductions in Pact tanks. [REDACTED]

The Soviets unsuccessfully sought reductions in dual-capable aircraft in SALT-I, SALT-II, and the recently-concluded INF Treaty. The aircraft with which they were concerned in those earlier negotiations, however, were longer-range, dual-capable aircraft with combat radii in excess of 1000 kilometers--such as USAF F-111 and F-4 aircraft based in Europe, and US Navy carrier-based A-6s and A-7s. The Soviets categorized these aircraft as Forward Based Systems (FBS)--their term for US nuclear systems based abroad or at sea on the European periphery and capable of striking targets in the USSR. [REDACTED]

In the talks between NATO and the Warsaw Pact now underway in Vienna seeking to establish the mandate for future conventional arms reduction talks, Soviet negotiators and other Soviet officials consistently stress that aircraft must be included as part of the "conventional forces, and their equipment" that will be discussed in the new talks. NATO has insisted that it will neither offer nor accept any proposal regarding reduction of fixed-wing combat aircraft in the "initial stage" of new arms control negotiations. The US delegation to the Mandate talks believes that eventually the USSR and its allies will accept very general language in the mandate concerning the forces to be addressed--as long as NATO continues to promise that all equipment of conventional forces can be discussed in the new talks, even if there is no reference to specific items of equipment in the mandate. Whatever the mandate text says, once the formal negotiations begin, the Soviets will press NATO to reduce fighter-bomber and ground attack aircraft--trying to snare as many dual-capable aircraft as possible. It is also apparent that they will seek to include US-based reinforcement aircraft as well as US Navy and possibly



Marine Corps aviation in calculating the air balance in Europe. [REDACTED]

Assessing the Air Balance in Europe

Quantitative measures of the air balance between NATO and the Warsaw Pact depend upon the counting criteria employed:

-- What types of combat aircraft are to be included? The choice may be made according to an aircraft's design capabilities or according to the primary mission of its unit. A complicating factor is that many aircraft on both sides are multi-purpose and aircrews typically train to perform more than one type of mission--e.g. up to 10 percent of training by Soviet fighter aircrews involves attacks against ground targets. The percentage of training devoted to various types of missions can easily be altered.

• In figure 1, we have aggregated all NATO and Pact combat aircraft which are capable of performing ground attack missions and are based in the Atlantic-to-Urals zone in peacetime. Excluded are land- and carrier-based naval aircraft in both alliances and reinforcing aircraft which would enter the zone in wartime but which are normally based outside the zone. Included are fighter bombers, ground attack aircraft, medium bombers, those reconnaissance and fighter aircraft capable of ground attack, and similar aircraft in the training establishment. Figure 1 shows a two to one Pact advantage using these criteria.

-- Is the count intended to highlight aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons? Not all of these aircraft would be assigned a nuclear mission in wartime. Moreover, a considerable number of aircraft in fighter, and reconnaissance units are also nuclear capable. Furthermore, some models of a particular aircraft design are nuclear capable, while other "look alike" versions are not--e.g. US Air Force A-7s are not nuclear capable, while the US Navy versions are.

• In figure 2, we have aggregated all NATO and Pact combat aircraft which are dual-capable, using the same counting criteria as cited for figure 1. In this instance, the Pact enjoys an advantage of about three to one in peacetime--excluding reinforcements from outside the zone and Navy and Marine Corps aircraft.