

REPRODUCED
PAGE A13

NEW YORK TIMES
1 October 1984

NATO Gives High Priority To War in Air

By DREW MIDDLETON

Special to The New York Times

STUTT GART, West Germany — With NATO holding major exercises in this country, alliance commanders seem reasonably confident that their forces have the capacity to engage and halt an initial conventional attack on

Western Europe. The immediate problem, they suggest, would be holding off the subsequent waves of attackers.

The commanders, who spoke in separate interviews in mid-September, said that if there should be a Soviet attack on Western Europe, the second wave of attacking divisions would be supported by surface-to-surface missiles and would have ample air support from bases in East Germany and Poland.

New surveillance systems, the officers said, would enable the Western alliance's air forces to strike the missiles, air bases and the second attacking wave, referred to as "follow-on" forces. The problem, as it is seen by ground commanders, is the availability of air resources.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's military priority in the event of aggression will be air superiority over the Soviet Air Force. Although the air forces work closely with ground units, commanders said they would be insistent that before anything else, such as bombing enemy missile sites, they must attain superiority in the air.

Reinforcements Are Key Factor

The key factor is the arrival in time and in strength of reinforcing squadrons from the United States and their deployment on NATO airfields. Once there, with air superiority won, they can start to deal with the follow-up forces and their missile and air support.

Both airmen and soldiers concede that the first three or four days after Soviet aggression would be the period of maximum risk.

The major tactical problem facing alliance commanders arises from a natural emphasis on a forward defense for West Germany. At its most extreme, this means that the Federal Republic would be defended on or near its frontiers, a formula that gives little room for tactical maneuvering.

Officers say the problem has been emphasized by intelligence reports that the Soviet Union is developing special units trained to break through the NATO front and attack depots, lines of communication and reserve forces. Few military leaders doubt that the Russians have the information on allied dispositions they would need to carry out such tactics if they should break through.

On the other hand there are many who believe that basic Soviet strategy has not altered and that the emphasis will be on mass. These sources believe that if the Russians should break through anywhere along the long allied line they would feed the follow-on divisions through it without paying much attention to units on the flanks.

Stress on Flexible Defense

In either event, NATO commanders increasingly ask for a flexible defense that will enable them to concentrate strong armored and infantry forces behind the forward areas to deliver counterattacks.

Gen. Leopold Chalupa, the West German who commands the Central Army Group, pointed out that any defense in depth, that is, one that would permit the enemy's overrunning of forward areas, would be unacceptable to the Germans living in those areas.

He expects that a solid allied base would enable NATO to meet the attacking divisions and, at the same time, deal with the follow-on units in local counterattacks. General Chalupa also observed that the flow of modern tanks into the American, West German and British armies would provide NATO with a flexibility of response it has lacked up to now.

Allied tactics in the event of war obviously are secret, but interviews with commanders left the impression that despite the enhanced flexibility and mobility of the three main forces in Germany, withdrawals to positions well behind the frontier from which counterattacks could be mounted would be limited in number.

There is a geographical reason for this. As one American general put it, "This isn't the Soviet Union or North Africa; one tactical withdrawal could give the enemy half of Germany with all that means in airfields, highways and railroads."

STAT