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Why US is split on Soviet defense budget

By Brad Knickerbocker
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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There is an air of perennial theater about it.

One US government intelligence expert says the Soviet Union spends so much on its armed forces. A Soviet analyst from another agency comes up with a different figure. Politically motivated officials run with the figures that most fit their preconceptions — cut defense spending; no, increase it. And the public is left wondering who is right.

That is happening now with reports from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The CIA says the Soviet military spending rate in recent years has been relatively flat, increasing at about 2 percent annually. DIA says the annual rate of increase is more like 5 to 8 percent.

Why the disparity, and what difference does it make?

Both agencies use the same raw intelligence data, obtained from satellites, spies, and published documents. But there is much room for interpretation. For example, how relevant are figures on Soviet military spending when converted from rubles to dollars? There is no generally accepted conversion rate for the ruble as there is, say, for the British pound or French franc. What is a logical figure for Soviet labor costs, and how can this be compared with what a relatively high-paid US defense worker earns?

"Dollars are a poor substitute for capability in evaluating the threat," cautions Richard Stubbings of Duke University, a White House defense spending analyst for 20 years.

One evaluating military capability, CIA and DIA officials are more nearly in agreement. Even though there was an apparent slowdown in military investment from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s, the Soviet Union continued to produce large

quantities of military equipment: 1,800 strategic missiles, 5,300 combat aircraft, and 15,500 tanks.

Harold Brown, US secretary of defense under President Carter, once put it this way: "When we build, they build. When we stop, they build."

Even though the rate of increase in Soviet military spending appears to have flattened, CIA deputy director Robert Gates told Congress in recently released testimony that "spending levels were so high that the defense establishment was able to continue to modernize its forces and to enhance substantially its military capabilities."

Does this mean that the Soviet arsenal is better than that of the US?

According to the Pentagon, the United States is ahead of the Soviet Union in 15 of the 20 "most important basic technology areas" and behind in none.

The technological gap in weapons that are actually deployed is narrower: US ahead in 17 weapons categories, equal in 10, behind in 5. But the Soviet Union apparently is having trouble catching up.

"The figures signify serious Soviet shortcomings relative to the United States in the area of basic military technology," writes congressional analyst Richard Kaufman in the quarterly journal Soviet Economy. "Soviet weaknesses in initiating and adopting new technology could become more pronounced as the trend toward increased sophistication of weaponry continues."

The US emphasizes its technological edge most controversially in the Reagan administration's push for space-based systems to defeat a Soviet nuclear missile attack. But the administration's military buildup also reflects what military officers, who might have to use the new gear in combat, frequently are

heard to say about more conventional weapons: "Quality is better than quantity . . . especially when deployed in large numbers."

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger stresses the size of the Soviet arsenal in defending his record-breaking budget requests.

"The Soviets have maintained an overall numerical advantage in most categories of conventional forces throughout the postwar period," he states in his report to Congress for fiscal 1986. "Since the mid-1970s they have widened their advantage in nearly every force category by producing major weapons at rates exceeding those of the United States and our NATO allies combined."

Critics acknowledge that the Warsaw Pact arsenal is larger than NATO's. But they say this ignores several things.

While the US is warming up militarily with China, large numbers of Soviet forces must concentrate on the threat from that direction.

French forces remain independent of NATO command but presumably would not stand idle in the face of a westward push by East Bloc armored and infantry divisions. The NATO-Warsaw Pact balance also ignore close US military allies in other parts of the world, especially Japan.

"When allies are added in, the US and its allies exceeded the Soviets and their allies in defense spending for each of the last 15 years," said Richard Stubbings, the former White House budget analyst.

It is also generally accepted that the Western alliance — for all its squabbles — is a genuine grouping of friends who can be counted on in time of crisis. It is less clear whether, say, Polish troops would enthusiastically take part in an invasion of Western Europe.

It is within this context that intelligence estimates of Soviet military spending — imperfect as they are — must be seen, these experts say.