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SOVIET - CIA

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The CIA, apparently contradicting Defense Secretary Casspar Weinberger, said in testimony made public today that the Soviet Union halved the rate of growth in its defense spending starting in 1977.

"Before 1976, growth in total defense spending had averaged about four to five per cent per year; after 1976, the rate of increase in spending dropped appreciably, to about two per cent a year," the Central Intelligence Agency said.

A The testimony by Deputy CIA Director Robert Gates was given last November 21 to a congressional economic subcommittee and was made public today by Sen. William Proxmire. -

Proxmire, a Wisconsin Democrat, commented that "it is time for Washington to take official notice that Soviet military procurement has been stagnant for the past seven years and to stop acting like nothing has changed."

Gates' testimony appeared to conflict sharply with Weinberger, who has said repeatedly that a Soviet military build-up has proceeded unabated since the 1970s.

The Pentagon and CIA have been engaged in a running battle over Soviet defense spending rates, and Gates said in his testimony that the intelligence agency was confident of its analysis.

His analysis went through 1983, and he said that since then the CIA had "noted evidence of some acceleration in the rate of increase in defense spending."

Gates estimated that Moscow spends 13 or 14 per cent of the country's Gross National Product on defense. The United States spends about seven per cent of the American GNP, which is much larger than the Soviet Union's.

The Soviet economy pulled out of a decline in 1983, Gates said, growing about a three per cent, but growth slowed to two per cent in 1984 because of a poor harvest.

He said the agency was forecasting that "the upswing in GNP growth could continue for another year or two."

Although defense spending growth slowed sharply for seven years, Gates said the Soviet defense establishment managed to continue modernizing and improve its military.

During that time, he said, the Soviets purchased 1,100 intercontinental ballistic missiles, more than 700 sea-launched ballistic missiles, 300 bombers and 5,000 fighters.

"Despite the scale of the ongoing Soviet defense programs, the growth of spending did slow," Gates said.

"The main source of slower growth in defense spending was a stagnation in spending for military procurement after 1976," he said.