

A major Soviet victory

MOSCOW — While U.S. and Soviet leaders are getting ready to talk peace here, NATO commanders are facing one of the worst crises of the past 25 years. Crisis is really too soft a word. What has happened to NATO's tanks and anti-tank defences is a disaster of enormous importance.

Modern battles are fought and won by tanks and armored personnel carriers. The Soviets and their allies outnumber NATO in this decisive arm by almost 3-1. Unwilling to spend enough to match the Soviets in tanks, NATO has invested instead in lower-cost anti-tank missiles and a small number of modern tanks. Until recently, NATO felt fairly secure that its thick anti-tank missile screens could hold a Soviet armored attack.

That was until the Soviets suddenly revealed, to NATO's total shock, that at least 60% of its tanks in East Europe were protected by new reactive armor blocks. The shaped charge warheads on NATO's anti-tank missiles work by concentrating a thin plasma of burning metal at a spot on a tank's steel armor. The jet burns through and erupts into fragments inside. The exploding reactive armor breaks up or deflects the plasma jet.

Inexpensive reactive armor blocks hung on the frontal arc of Soviet tanks have made almost all of NATO's anti-tank weapons useless. So NATO is racing to develop two-stage tandem warheads that first blow off the reactive armor and then hit the steel armor behind. A crash program is also under way to field missiles that attack the thin roof armor on tanks.

But, according to recent revelations, even these efforts may prove useless. Existing Soviet T-64, T-72 and T-80 tanks have been fitted with new, layered armor made from steel, ceramics and plastics. This armor defeats the 105-mm guns of most NATO tanks — even when using the depleted uranium round now being deployed by the U.S.

In recent congressional testimony, the leading U.S. tank expert was asked: "If we went to war, our bullets (meaning shells) and missiles would

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bounce off Soviet tanks?" The answer: "That's correct."

The by now horrified Americans have pulled back all their 105mm-gunned M1 tanks from Europe and are planning to send over more 120-mm gun M1-A1 models. But even this may not solve the problem.

The bigger gun of the M1-A1 and the excellent West German Leopard II can just penetrate the improved armor of the current Soviet tanks. But the majority of NATO tanks are armed with smaller 105s. Their shells will bounce off Soviet tanks.

Worse, the next generation of Soviet tanks, the FST-1 and FST-2, armed with giant 135-mm guns, will be proof against even NATO's 120-mm guns. These new tanks have both improved layered and reactive armor that can withstand a direct hit on the frontal arc by 120-mm shells and the largest anti-tank missiles. Most Soviet tanks are also having sheet armor and reactive armor applied to turret roofs to foil top attack missiles.

The best U.S. tank, the M1-A1, cannot stop a direct hit by the new Soviet 135-mm shell. Current Soviet tanks may also be able to penetrate the M1-A1's ceramic armor that was thought, until recently, to be invulnerable. It seems the Soviets have developed a new dense, heavy shell that can shatter the M1-A1's brittle armor.

All this tank technology may sound confusing, but the basic reality is simple. The Soviets have stolen a march on NATO in tank design. If war broke out tomorrow, NATO simply could not stop the 23,000 Soviet tanks facing Europe. Heavily outnumbered NATO tanks, by contrast, would be shot to pieces. NATO's vaunted anti-tank missiles would be useless and their crews slaughtered.

Mines and air attack would, of course, cause delays. But NATO's prime anti-tank weapons have been made obsolete. It's as if the British had their longbows taken away the day before Agincourt.

Which leaves the last, desperate resort: Nuclear weapons. But — coincidentally — intermediate-range nukes that could have been used against advancing tank armies are being scrapped and pressure is growing to junk NATO's short-range battlefield nukes that are its last line of defence.

Which leaves NATO commanders facing overwhelming numbers of Soviet tanks and artillery — with no way of stopping this red juggernaut.

War may not erupt tomorrow, but the Soviets have nonetheless won a major military victory. NATO has been placed in a position of psychological inferiority and outright fear. A NATO alliance that knows the Red Army's tanks can reach the English Channel in 13 days is a NATO that is less likely to withstand Soviet political demands.

President Ronald Reagan would do well to raise this critical issue in Moscow.