

# New missile threat

The Soviets have by now finished deploying a new generation of missiles that is giving western military planners a bad case of the jitters. These are not the long-range ICBMs we usually hear about, but mobile, tactical missiles with ranges from 72 to 540 miles.

For the first time, such missiles offer the Soviets the capability of staging a disarming, non-nuclear first strike against NATO.

What makes the new SS-21, SS-22 and SS-23 missiles so deadly is their radically improved accuracy. Older generations of Soviet tactical missiles were inaccurate and plagued with technical glitches. The new missiles, by contrast, are so accurate and reliable they can probably destroy many key NATO targets using conventional warheads, though they also can carry nuclear warheads.

Being highly mobile, they can be easily concealed or moved to avoid counterattack.

Prime targets for such weapons would be NATO airfields, docks, radar and communication centres, command headquarters, munition dumps, missile bases, fuel depots and prepositioned equipment stores.

Fired from bases in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, the SS-22 and SS-23 could hit most military airbases in Britain, eastern France, West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and northern Italy. New runway cratering munitions would ensure serious disruption to NATO's ability to deliver the air strikes that are its only way of slowing advancing Warsaw Pact tank armies.

A threat that grows even graver if the Soviets should decide to arm their missiles with chemical warheads. Showering an airbase with persistent nerve gas or blistering agents, for example, would reduce its operational effectiveness by 50% in the

## Punch



"Nighty night. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite."

ERIC MARGOLIS



first eight hours and by another 25% thereafter. Similar degradation of performance would occur at logistics hubs and command installations.

What all this means is that the Soviets could launch a surprise first strike — using only non-nuclear weapons — that might come close to paralyzing NATO's ability to quickly respond to a major Soviet invasion. Coming on top of the danger from commando raids, sabotage and heavy air attacks, this new threat from tactical missiles is of grave concern.

Taking this threat very seriously are the ever-vigilant Israelis. They are deeply concerned about the small but growing number of 72-mile range SS-21s in the hands of Syria. Israel is also fretting over reports that longer-range SS-23s may soon be sold to Syria and Iraq.

Israelis know their limited number of airbases are vulnerable to attack by runway penetration warheads, disruptive scatter munitions and, of course, chemical munitions. Like NATO, Israel's air force is the first line of defence against a surprise armored attack. If vital airfields are damaged for even a few hours, the results could be disastrous.

In 1973, for a good example, a few well-placed Syrian missiles on Israel's northern airfields would have likely meant the loss of the Golan Heights.

Also vulnerable to tactical missile attack are the assembly points and storage depots for Israel's citizen army and its stockpiled equipment. Any delay to Israeli troop mobilization could also mean the margin between victory and defeat.

Being more serious about defence than other nations, Israel is moving into action. According to recent reports in Washington, Israel has decided to embark on an anti-missile defence system using lasers and perhaps some point-defence guns. Other reports have suggested a series of mirrors is contemplated that will direct the laser beams at incoming warheads.

While the Israelis are busy working, the U.S. and Western Europe are still discussing how to implement a low-level version of Star Wars that will offer some measure of defence against Soviet tactical missiles. Fortunately, the technology involved is far simpler than that needed for a space-based system. In fact, the Soviets are already well advanced in upgrading their SA-12 system to give it full anti-missile capability.

Which just goes to show how excruciatingly difficult it is to control arms. Nuclear arms may be in rough balance, and maybe even ready for reduction. But now, nasty surprise, comes a new conventional threat, and the need for new billions for a down-to-earth Star Wars to cover vulnerable inner space.