The Newly Improved MX Missile

A presidential panel has come up with new packaging for a plan to put the controversial MX nuclear missile into existing silos in the Northern Plains. Last year, Congress nixed such a proposal on the grounds that the missiles would then be vulnerable to Soviet attack. But the President's Commission of Strategic Forces, claiming new insight into Soviet military policy, says that such an attack is unlikely and that the MX will therefore be safe.

The commission recommends that 100 MX missiles be deployed as quickly as possible in silos now housing Minuteman and Titan missiles. It also recommends that work begin on a small, single-warhead ICBM, to be deployed in silos or shelters and on specially designed mobile launchers, beginning in the early 1990's. The commission says that the small missile is better than one carrying multiple warheads because it constitutes a less valuable target, should Soviet military policy change and an attack on U.S. land-based forces someday seem attractive. The commission suggests that the Administration take this into consideration in the development of a new arms control plan that places more emphasis on warhead totals.

The recommendations on the MX seem popular at the White House. At a photo session with the commission members, Reagan joked that "some of my best friends are MX missiles." Indeed, members of the panel were obviously selected because of similar affinities. Six had presided over the early days of MX development at top posts in the Defense and State Department, and a majority had stated, before their appointment, that they thought the MX should be deployed with or without invulnerable basing. Brent Scowcroft, a former national security adviser to President Ford who chaired the commission, told a newspaper on the day he was appointed that "the MX is a very important part of our future defense posture." So alike were the member's views that the panel never took a vote, and its conclusions were unanimous.*

The commission's report states, with surprising candor, that the central justification for the MX is not its potential invulnerability, but its ability to "put at risk those types of Soviet targets—including hardened ones such as military command bunkers and facilities, missile silos, nuclear weapons . . . which the Soviet leaders have given every indication by their actions they value most, and which constitute their tools of control and power. . . . [The United States] must have a credible capability for controlled, prompt, limited attack on hard targets."

Although this desire could be fulfilled either by improving the guidance system of existing Minuteman missiles or by deploying a highly accurate submarine missile on land, the commission says that both would take longer than deploying the MX. In addition, the commission says, neither would pose the same psychological threat. As explained by John Deutch, a commission member who is a dean of science at MIT, "It is the opening of a new production line—with potentially unlimited missile deployment—that will force the Soviets to sign an arms agreement." There is also the fact that the MX's importance "has been stressed by the last 4 Presidents," as the commission notes. How can the United States be trusted unless it makes good on its bomb-building promises?

The commission says that the MX—not its basing—is of paramount importance. Most fancy basing ideas depend on unproven technology, cost too much, or need too much time, the commission says, thereby dispatching such past Pentagon favorites as Dense Pack and Racetrack. "At this time, the Commission believes that no ABM [antiballistic missile] technologies appear to combine practicality, survivability, low cost, and technical effectiveness." More research is suggested, but the problem is not urgent. A threat of retaliation from bombers and submarines is enough to prevent a Soviet attack on land-based missiles, the commission says. This is a clear about-face for members who had previously insisted on the existence of a strategic window of vulnerability.

The deployment suggestion has attracted substantial criticism. The Soviet Union, for example, concluded long ago that a deployment of highly accurate U.S. missiles in vulnerable silos looks like a preparation for a first strike. This perception also enjoys wide support in the U.S. Congress. "If the Commission's recommendations are adopted, we might as well announce that America has adopted a first-strike nuclear policy," says Senator Mark Hatfield (R–Ore.). Similar remarks have been made by a number of scientists, including Hans Bethe, Richard Garwin, Henry Kendall, George Rathjens, Philip Morrison, Victor Weisskopf, George Wald, and Frank von Hippel.

A number of Administration officials have attacked the idea in the past. Paul Nitze, for example, who is now Reagan's chief strategic arms negotiator, said in 1979 that "Deployment of a larger missile in the Minuteman silos . . . has the negative feature of a threatening but vulnerable U.S. first-strike counterforce capability. Accordingly, it would increase crisis instability and the prospect that deterrence would fail."

Commission members say that the planned deployment of only 100 MX is not enough to pose a threat of a first strike. But there is a contradiction here because the commission intends that this threat drive the Soviets into earnest negotiations. In any event, as pointed out by Paul Warnke, a former strategic arms negotiator and assistant secretary of defense, the Soviets can respond simply by enlarging their own forces, or by adopting a policy of launch-on-warning of U.S. attack. He says that the commission absurdly subscribes to an "arms race theory of arms control: the more missiles you build, the more threatening new systems you devise, the greater your chance of controlling arms."

There is a surprising appetite for the cold war in most of the commission members. James Woolsey, a former Navy under secretary who drafted the report, acknowledges that the proposals will create some risks. But he says that the United States "must be able to contain the Soviet Union—an expansionist-minded totalitarian country." The purpose, he says, is to force the Soviet state "to begin to deal with its internal problems, rather than to continue to divert its energies into foreign aggression." This, he says, is the fundamental reason for constructing and deploying the MX missile.—**R. JEFFREY SMITH**

*The members were Nicholas Brady, William Clements, John Deutch, Alexander Haig, Richard Helms, John Lyons, William Perry, Thomas Reed, Levering Smith, and James Woolsey. Advisers included Harold Brown, Lloyd Cutler, Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, John McCone, Donald Rumsfeld, and James Schlesinger.