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Coping with Gridlock

At the recent AAAS Annual Meeting in Detroit, the Council, with barely half its members present, voted unanimously a resolution calling on the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union to negotiate a halt to the buildup of nuclear weapons of the class that threatens each side's deterrent capability.* It was not a call for a comprehensive freeze across the family of nuclear weapons, but rather a very carefully formulated proposition aimed at the most unstabilizing element in the tense standoff into which both sides have drifted.

It was not the first time that an Annual Meeting has deplored the nuclear arms race and called for serious and purposeful arms control negotiations. What is different is that, with the support of its Committee on Science, Arms Control, and National Security, the Association has moved from generalizations to a realization of the intricacy of the national security dilemma, and to a better understanding of the multiple strata of complexity that must be dealt with knowledgeably. It is not helpful, for instance, to advocate a mutually "verifiable" agreement without confronting the realities, uncertainties, and technical limitations of available verification methods. In that regard, AAAS intends to go as far as classification limits allow to prepare and publish a readable "primer" on verification to aid the general understanding of this problematic factor.

The itch for a quick fix to the nuclear nightmare seizes us all. It seizes the peoples of the Soviet Union, too, although the power structure is vigilant in suppressing the spread of a popular peace movement that might get out of hand. Yet, even with the momentum increasing for a qualitative abatement of the confrontation, it becomes clearer that the two sides have so little trust for each other that progress will be measured in inches, not in yards.

It is questionable whether a bargain struck in some manner to level off and reduce nuclear risk would be durable in the absence of a supporting framework of mutual stakes and interests. It would take more than a brief summit meeting and a handshake to produce such a framework. Given the ideological differences, it would take a lot of doing, but there is every reason to probe for openings in that direction even as the tedious arms control talks are resumed. The National Academy of Sciences, notwithstanding profound differences with the Soviets over human rights practices, has succeeded in preserving tenuous contacts with its counterpart institution in the interest of building trust. It may appear to be a small light in a spreading darkness, but its range of magnification is considerable.

As the texture of peace hangs each year by fewer and fewer threads, the need to reinforce arms negotiations with supportive joint initiatives becomes more compelling. Economic, scientific, and cultural ties should be seen as strategic instead of tactical. They provide a framework, an infrastructure, that is grounded to mutual interests and advantages, and they begin to assemble the countervailing array of connections that can in some measure abate distrust and create bilateral stakes that are themselves stabilizing. Each side has technological capabilities and scientific assets that could, without risk to either side's national security, be pooled. Ample and productive precedents already exist in such fields as astronomy, medicine, astronautics, and polar research.

The present danger is serious indeed. There is every reason to search for agreements to ease the nuclear gridlock. But if, at the same time, a broader basis for increasing mutual trust is not sought and found, the edge of crisis could yet draw blood.—WILLIAM D. CAREY

*Copies of the Council resolution are available from the Committee on Science, Arms Control, and National Security, AAAS, 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.