News & Comment

Missile Pact Edges Closer

Negotiators reconvene in Geneva this week to hammer out a pact on missiles in Europe. Some obstacles have been removed but problems remain, especially concern among the Western allies

In the late 1970s, the Western allies expressed growing alarm at the imminent deployment of three new types of Soviet missiles capable of striking targets virtually anywhere in Western Europe. Now that U.S. and Soviet negotiators appear to be on the verge of an agreement that could eliminate these missiles, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) might be expected to be overjoyed. Instead, it is highly nervous.

The progress toward an agreement—and the nervousness in the West—are the result of a series of surprising and deft moves by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev over the past 6 weeks. First, Gorbachev announced, in a speech on 28 February, that he was willing to negotiate a separate agreement to eliminate from Europe so-called intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF)—land-based missiles with a range of 1000 to 5000 kilometers. This immediately broke an impasse that had stalled negotiations since last October's summit meeting in Reykjavik, when the Soviets insisted on linking reductions in offensive forces to restrictions on President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.

Four days after Gorbachev's speech, U.S. negotiators put on the table in Geneva a draft INF agreement under which both the United States and the Soviet Union would remove all intermediate-range missiles from Europe and retain only a token force of 100 warheads each. The Soviets would put their remaining missiles in Asia and the remaining U.S. missiles would be based in the United States.

This would require the Soviets to dismantle 112 old SS-4s and more than 400 SS-20s, a missile with three warheads and a range of 5000 kilometers, the deployment of which in 1977 sparked the original concern in the West. Just 33 SS-20s would be retained. In return, the United States would destroy all but 100 of the single-warhead Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles that were installed in Europe in the 1980s partly in response to the SS-20s. So far, 108 Pershing IIs and 208 cruise missiles have been deployed in Europe.* Those interested in the bean-counting aspect of arms control were quick to point out that the Soviet Union would be required to scrap 93% of its deployed warheads while the United States would lose only 68%.

This formula, a variation of the so-called "zero option" first put forward by the Reagan Administration in 1981, had emerged from U.S.–Soviet negotiations last year and was broadly agreed to by both sides in Reykjavik. However, a major obstacle arose as negotiations progressed in March and early April. The Western allies are concerned that elimination of intermediate-range weapons would still leave Europe vulnerable to shorter range nuclear-armed missiles in which the Soviets have an overwhelming numerical advantage.

In particular, NATO is worried about the SS-12—a missile with a range of 900 kilometers, a new version of which was introduced in the late 1970s—and the SS-23, a 500-kilometer missile first deployed in 1985. The Soviets are believed to have between 110 and 120 SS-12s and around 20 SS-23s. The United States has no missiles of its own in this class, although it controls the warheads to 72 old Pershing 1a missiles owned by West Germany.

Deployment of the upgraded SS-12s and the new SS-23s has caused concern in part because the missiles are believed to be far more accurate than older missiles they are designed to replace. Last year, in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, under secretary of defense Fred Ikle said, for example, that "we anticipate that in the next decade the Soviets will deploy a new generation of more accurate short-range missiles capable of effectively delivering not only nuclear and chemical but conventional payloads deep into West European territory."

U.S. negotiators insisted that any INF agreement specifically include a freeze on the number of Soviet missiles in the 500- to 1000-kilometer range, and that the United States should have the right to match them. One option pushed by the Pentagon would involve removing the second stage of the Pershing IIs to convert them to shorter range missiles.

Last week, during Secretary of State George Shultz's visit to Moscow, Gorbachev apparently brushed this obstacle aside. He indicated that Moscow was prepared to negotiate the elimination of this class of missiles also.

Thus, the way seems open for an agreement that is close to the Reagan Administration's own 1981 zero option—a proposal that at the time was considered by many to be a bluff because it was thought to be totally unacceptable to the Soviets. Some hard bargaining on crucial details will be necessary when the INF negotiations reopen on 23 April, however. They include:

■ **Verification.** On 12 March, the United States proposed a strict verification scheme that would require unprecedented levels of on-site inspection to ensure that both sides keep to their end of an INF agreement. First, inspectors from each side would visit the other's missile sites to confirm the num-

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The SS-21

A new missile with an estimated range of 120 kilometers, it falls in the category of battlefield weapons that Gorbachev says the Soviets are willing to consider eliminating but which the United States does not want included in the INF talks.

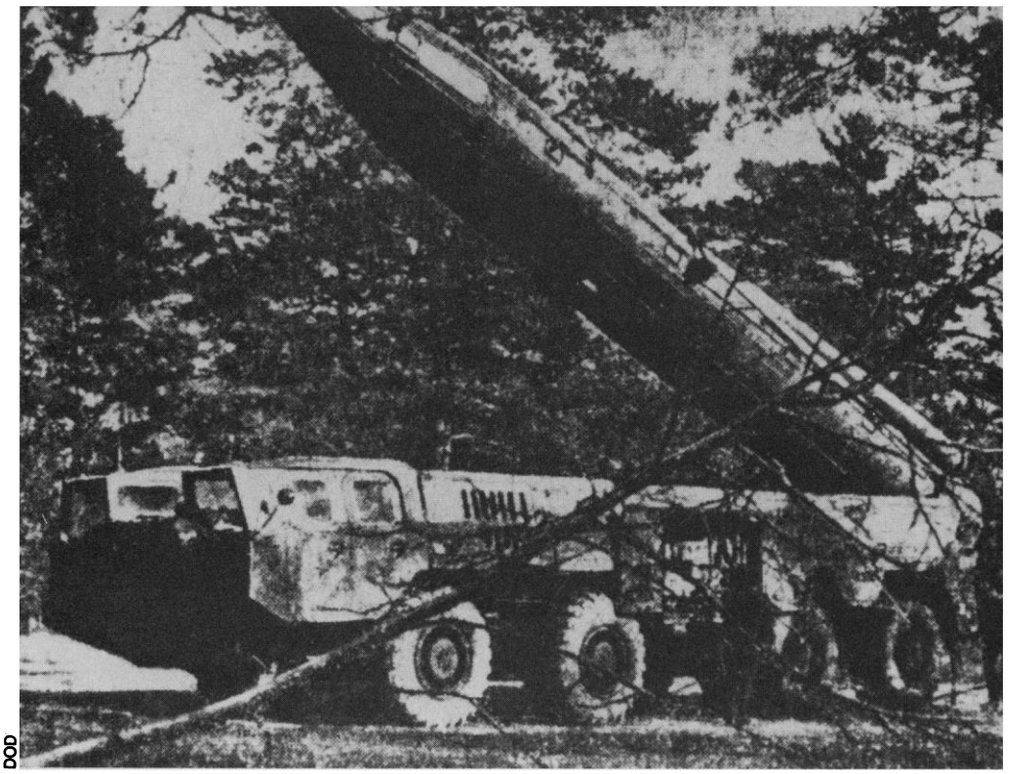
*NATO plans call for the deployment of a total of 464 ground-launched cruise missiles by 1988.

ber of weapons in place. Second, inspectors would be present while the missiles and warheads are destroyed. And third, permanent inspectors would be stationed at the sites where the retained missiles are eventually deployed. Surveillance would also be carried out at the factories where the missiles are built and stored. If questions about compliance arise, inspection of weapons plants would be required at short notice. The Soviets have accepted the principle of on-site inspection, according to U.S. officials, but they have so far made no verification proposal of their own. "We are all waiting for their draft [treaty] to be proposed," says one official, to see how serious a problem verification will be. A formal Soviet draft is expected to be proposed soon after the INF talks reopen in Geneva.

■ **The remaining warheads.** The Soviets have raised objections to a plan to deploy the 100 remaining U.S. missiles in Alaska, where they would be able to reach parts of the Soviet Union. Shultz is said to have argued in Moscow that the best solution would be to scrap all intermediate-range missiles, but the Soviets insisted on retaining 100 warheads. Some observers speculate that the Soviets will eventually drop this insistence in return for concessions on verification as the talks progress.

■ **Short-range missiles.** Although Gorbachev indicated a willingness last week to negotiate the elimination of missiles with a range of 500 to 1000 kilometers, many uncertainties remain. For example, Gorbachev initially said only that the Soviet Union would be willing to remove them from Europe, but since the missiles are highly mobile—their launchers are able to travel on ordinary roads—the United States has taken the position that any limits on these weapons must be worldwide. Shultz indicated in a press conference on 14 April that the Soviets have accepted this and have indicated that "the right number [on both sides] should be zero." An Administration official later said the United States regards it as "absolutely axiomatic" that limits be placed on these missiles as an integral part of an agreement on longer-range INF weapons.

■ **"Battlefield" missiles.** Even if all missiles with a range of 500 to 5000 kilometers are eliminated, a whole class of even shorter range missiles would remain. Again, the Soviets would have a large numerical advantage. According to a compilation put together by the Arms Control Association, the Soviets have some 1580 launchers in this class, including 130 SS-21s, a new missile introduced in 1981. The United States has only 72 aging Lance missile launchers. Gorbachev indicated last week that the Soviets may be prepared to negotiate these missiles down to zero as well, but the United States is not about to take up the offer. U.S. officials have said that negotiations on these missiles should take place only in the context of talks on reducing conventional arms. In fact, the United States is likely to make a push now to modernize, rather than eliminate, NATO's battlefield nuclear weapons in order to allay European fears about the political and military consequences of an INF agreement.



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The SS-12. *A more accurate version of this missile was deployed by the Soviets in the late 1970s. The United States insisted that limits be placed on this class of missile as part of any INF agreement. Gorbachev has proposed eliminating the entire class of weapons.*

Some European allies are extremely nervous about the elimination of intermediate-range missiles from Europe in part because they regard it as a large step toward the "denuclearization" of Europe, which, if carried to completion, could leave NATO's conventional forces potentially vulnerable to superior numbers of Warsaw Pact forces. France's defense minister, Andre Giraud, has even called the potential agreement a "nuclear Munich."

Scrapping the cruise and Pershing II missiles also removes one rung of the "flexible response" strategy under which NATO is supposed to stave off conventional attack by threatening a limited nuclear response. "Removal of the INF force leaves a large gap in the capability for flexible response," warned former U.S. defense officials John Deutch, Brent Scowcroft, and R. James Woolsey in an op-ed article in the *Washington Post* last month. They argued that "the proposal would be a significant step toward denuclearization of Europe, a longtime Soviet objective. Such an eventual step would wholly undercut NATO strategy, leaving no counter to Soviet conventional superiority except the use of U.S. strategic forces."

Administration spokesmen, including assistant defense secretary Richard Perle, have pointed out, however, that the proposed agreement would still leave more than 4000 nuclear warheads, artillery shells, and bombs in Europe under NATO control, which scarcely represents denuclearization of the continent. To help augment this arsenal and blunt concerns about denuclearization, the U.S. Defense Department is already talking about modernizing nuclear battlefield weapons. Last month, for example, Pentagon officials formally asked Congress to lift a ban on placing nuclear warheads on a new missile, called the Army Tactical Missile System, that is currently in the final stages of development. If the ban, which was imposed by Congress in 1983, is not lifted, the Pentagon said it would have to build a new missile to replace the Lance.

Gorbachev's willingness to negotiate the elimination of intermediate-range missiles has clearly put the Western allies on the spot. "It is fair to say that the Administration is having a difficult time taking 'yes' for an answer," says James P. Rubin, assistant director for research at the Arms Control Association. NATO is now being forced to admit uncertainty about the desirability of reducing the nuclear deterrent. "At least that has the benefit of being honest," notes Matthew Evangelista, a Soviet expert at the University of Michigan. ■ COLIN NORMAN