Arms Control and Europe's Nuclear Shield

By Henry A. Kissinger

The public, in America and Europe, is anxious about arms control. That anxiety in turn has produced an increasing clamor for agreements to end the so-called arms race. Arms control is being asked to banish the danger of nuclear war and to reverse the trend in East-West relations.

This places a greater burden on these negotiations than they can possibly carry. Arms control is in danger of being transformed from a technical quest for strategic stability into a *deus ex machina*. Indeed, it is in danger of turning into a tool of Soviet political warfare.

The history of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force negotiations illustrates these points. In response to the deployment of Soviet intermediate-range missiles, the U.S. in 1979 encouraged its North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies to invite it to station similar weapons in Europe.

But even in 1979 NATO did not dare to announce its decision in strategic terms, subject to subsequent arms-control negotiations. The deployment became political with the so-called dual-track approach, which called for prior negotiations to ban the weapons altogether and make their deployment dependent on a *failure* of the negotiations.

Opponents' Absurd Argument

This decision was fateful. Experience with arms-control negotiations—or Soviet diplomacy—should have warned that an unambiguous outcome of such talks was nearly impossible. Instead, the decision guaranteed a domestic crisis in most countries slated to receive missiles. Indeed, it almost surely supplied an incentive for the Soviets to procrastinate and thus test the resolve of Western governments.

More important, the NATO decision caused the debate about the reasons for deploying the missiles to become bogged down either in domestic politics or in all the evasions and contradictions of the general NATO controversy. Opponents, appealing both to fears and nationalism, invented the argument that the intermediate-range missiles reflected our desire to confine a possible war to European territory. This was absurd. We already had thousands of short-range tactical weapons in Europe.

The real justification for deployment was quite the opposite: because the intermediate-range weapons could reach *beyond* Europe, they help prevent the nuclear blackmail of Europe by linking its strategic defense with that of the U.S. With intermediate-range American weapons in Europe, the Soviets could not threaten Europe selectively; any nuclear attack and any successful conventional attack would trigger an American counterblow from European installations. The Soviets would have to calculate, even in case of conventional attack, that we would use our missiles before they were overrun. Hence the Soviets would have to attack the missiles if they used even conventional weapons in Europe; that in turn would trigger our strategic forces.

The Soviets grasped the significance of the new deployment immediately. They threatened that any use of these weapons would be answered with an attack on the U.S. But instead of welcoming this U.S.-Europe linkage—which strengthened deterrence by facing the Soviets with risks they were almost surely unprepared to run—our European allies pressed us to pursue dual-track negotiations for the purpose of forestalling any deployment. We in turn confused matters by putting forward the so-called zero option: our readiness to abandon our European deployment if the Soviets gave up their own missiles.

In their conduct of negotiations, the Soviets are striving for a larger objective than stability; they want nothing less than to change NATO's political complexion.

Had the Soviets snapped up the offer—or modified it by limiting it to Europe—the U.S. would have been permanently barred from any new deployments. At the same time, the Soviet capacity to blackmail Europe would have remained unimpaired either through new tactical weapons or the warheads in their long-range strategic forces. Nevertheless—and symptomatic of the confusion in allied strategic thought—many of our European allies interpreted our offer as intransigence. We were urged instead to come up with a new position—that is, to abandon the zero option. In practice this meant being asked to propose an agreed, reduced level of weapons.

So the U.S. did abandon the zero option for an interim agreement on a reduced level of missiles for *both* sides. But no sooner had we accepted this allied advice than some allies pressed for more concessions. This required lowering the proposed ceiling and even permitting some disparity in Moscow's favor. And when in effect we later went along with that approach, we were still blamed for the deadlock.

The Soviets rejected the interim offer not because of the inclusion of the Pershings or the inadequacy of the ceiling, but because their strategy in the INF talks has been consistently offensive. Their objective has never wavered; they were bent on ejecting American intermediate-range missiles from Europe altogether.

The Soviets understand very well from our current proposal—and many public statements—that the U.S. is willing to settle for a relatively small number of missiles stationed in Europe. Their argument about the shortened warning time caused by Pershing IIs is for the gullible. A Pershing takes 8 to 10 minutes to reach the Soviet Union from Western Europe. An ICBM takes 25 to 30 minutes from the U.S.; a submarine-launched missile, depending on its location, requires 15 to 20 minutes. Were the Pershings to be removed, what would the Soviets do with the extra few minutes of warning time?

Their argument that the British and French forces can balance the Soviet SS-20s is either sophistry or a misunderstanding. Given the huge disparity in warheads between France and Britain on the one side and the Soviet Union on the other, it is self-evident that British and French nuclear forces can deter only a nuclear attack on these countries—if that. They can offer no protection to other NATO allies; they create no threat of a first use—whatever the extremity in which NATO conventional forces might find themselves.

The Soviets again dismissed our proposal and walked out of the talks because they are at present conducting the negotiations as a political maneuver. The Soviets are striving for a larger objective than stability; they want nothing less than to change the political complexion of NATO.

For the second time in 10 years, the Soviets would like to stop a NATO deployment to which governments had committed themselves for many years—the neutron bomb in 1978 and now the intermediate-range missiles. The practical effect would be to give the Soviet Union a veto over future NATO deployments—at least in the nuclear field. And the way would be open for the selective nuclear blackmail of Europe.

After a brief period of relief, the NATO countries would recognize the weakening of the American nuclear shield. Neutralism or a resentful kind of nationalism could develop. The Soviets would be close to achieving what they first proposed (and we rejected) during the negotiations for the Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War in 1974: that in case of a European war, the use of nuclear weapons be restricted to the countries of Europe, excluding the Soviet Union and the U.S.

The fundamental INF problem is simple. If the Soviet objective is truly to prevent a surprise attack from our European deployments, an agreement on numbers and composition will be easy and rapid. What we should not do is to abandon the deployment of missiles in Europe altogether. And if the Soviets insist on that, it will be clear proof that their objective will be to wreck the Western alliance. If our allies cannot bring themselves to say this clearly to their publics, they will only have themselves to blame when they are engulfed by creeping pacifism and neutralism. And in that case, the psychological basis for keeping the missiles in Europe will erode first in Europe but eventually also in the U.S.

Three Major Adjustments

To be sure, it is highly desirable for the INF talks to resume. But the very plaintiveness of Western appeals gives the Soviets an incentive to continue on the political offensive. And if the talks resume, it is essential that the Western countries show more fortitude and unity than heretofore. So long as there exists a nearly desperate longing for a negotiating gimmick, so long as the U.S. is automatically blamed for any impasse, Soviet intransigence is likely to be spurred by the hope that persistence in their current course will unravel the alliance.

There have been three major adjustments in America's INF position in one year, in large part to placate allied public opinion. But when positions succeed each other at a dizzying pace, none is understood any longer. Fuel is given to the argument that we are cynical, that we do not know what we are doing, that our basic position is flawed. The Soviets will have no incentive to change course if they perceive the alliance engaged in competitive gimmickry. The U.S. has made its share of mistakes, but the root cause of the difficulty in INF negotiations is a Soviet assault on the existing political equilibrium in Europe.

This is adapted from Mr. Kissinger's remarks Jan. 13 to a conference in Brussels, Belgium, under the auspices of the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University.