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Andropov's war of nerves

There is a growing awareness in the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon that Soviet President Yuri Andropov is not likely to sit down quietly to negotiate a serious arms control agreement with the United States just because the first nine Pershing II nuclear missiles are successfully deployed this December in West Germany. That hope was always an illusion.

In the light of current Russian warnings, a protracted war of nerves by Moscow to break the NATO alliance is the predictable Soviet reaction to the initial emplacement of intermediate-range American missiles. By exploiting the popular opposition to nuclear weapons and the political divisions in the West, the Soviets see a chance to split the United States from Europe, and they won't settle for serious negotiations until they have exhausted all the possibilities of this unique opportunity.

According to West German officials who have studied every scrap of intelligence for clues to Soviet intentions, the Russians have not yet given up on the hope of blocking entirely the first planned American deployment in December. By massive clandestine funding of the demonstrations and the deliberate provocation by secret agents of violence between American troops and German protesters, the Soviets plan to create spectacular evidence of widespread opposition in order to influence the final Bundestag debate on Nov. 21.

West German officials also are bracing for an ingenious Soviet offer, combining both carrot and stick, to be made coincidentally with the Bundestag debate. The Soviets are expected to propose a unilateral reduction in the number of Soviet SS-20s, provided there is no American deployment while negotiations continue. This tempting carrot would be accompanied by a threat to walk out of the negotiations if the Americans deploy.

Both West German and American officials are determined to oppose this gambit, because an indefinite delay in the deployment schedule removes any incentive for the Russians to come to terms finally. But these officials are aware that the drawn-out, two-year sequence of Pershing II deployments in batteries of nine until all 108 are in place is a standing invitation to the Russians to fish in Germany's troubled political waters.

Since there are not enough completed missiles or trained personnel to speed up this schedule, the Soviets will be able to exploit month after month the deep fears these new nuclear batteries will engender in the surrounding populations. These proliferating missiles will also inevitably become targets for terrorist attack and sabotage.

Moreover, in their attempt to undermine this deployment, the Soviets will be working to widen the first major division in the foreign-policy consensus that has made West Germany such a reliable ally for more than 20 years. In provincial party meetings, the rank and file of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) have been voting by large majorities to repudiate the two-track policy originally proposed by Helmut Schmidt in 1979.

In the national party congress of the SPD scheduled just before the November Bundestag debate on the missiles, a solid majority against American deployment now appears inevitable, and the German body politic will be dangerously divided on a fundamental issue. Unlike the British Labor Party, which suffered a crushing defeat as the result of its anti-nuclear stance, the SPD has profited from its leftward drift in recent provincial elections and with time could challenge Chancel-

lor Kohl's parliamentary majority.

Another pressure point on which West Germans feel peculiarly sensitive is the whole range of economic and cultural contacts with East Germany and Eastern Europe. The Soviets already have threatened to cut back on these contacts, and in the coming months they will slice away at East-West relationships with carefully contrived salami tactics to increase the cost of American deployment to the average German.

Finally, the suddenly talkative Soviet marshals are clearly engaged in a sustained campaign of intimidation designed to convince both Europeans and Americans that deployment of Pershing IIs will increase the danger of war, escalate the arms race, and put the opposing armies on hair-trigger alert.

In addition to expediting the planned emplacement of their new, more accurate shorter-range missiles in Eastern Europe, the Soviets have warned they will position some of their nuclear missiles within 10 minutes of American targets. By ostentatiously moving their missile submarines closer to American shores and placing SS-20s on their Pacific Coast within reach of Alaska and Seattle, the Soviets could add to the climate of fear and attempt to exploit the potential divisiveness of the upcoming election campaign for the American presidency.

After first frightening the Europeans with careless rhetoric about nuclear war, the Reagan administration has finally reached agreement on a flexible negotiating stance toward the Soviets that has the support and understanding of most NATO governments.

Under these circumstances, the Reagan administration has no choice but to proceed with steady nerves to the agreed deployment of American missiles in Europe in the hope that the Soviets will eventually come to the negotiating table, when they recognize that NATO's unity cannot be broken.