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U.S. Study Finds a Soviet ICBM Is Less of a Threat to Missile Silos

By BILL KELLER

WASHINGTON, July 18 — United States intelligence officials, in a revised assessment of a Soviet missile known as the SS-19, now believe that it is too inaccurate to pose a threat to American missile silos, Administration sources said today.

The new appraisal, which differs from assessments by the Pentagon, is contained in a secret report, the National Intelligence Estimate, which is prepared once a year by the Central Intelligence Agency and represents the consensus of United States intelligence experts.

Administration sources said that the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency disagreed in a footnote to the document and stood by earlier estimates of the missile's accuracy.

The purported capacity of the SS-19, an intercontinental ballistic missile, to destroy United States missile silos has been an important political factor in American arms control considerations and in the campaign to build an American counterpart, the MX.

Officials said the military significance of the revised estimate of SS-19 capabilities was minimal because another Soviet ICBM, the SS-18, is believed accurate enough to threaten missile silos.

The revised estimate of the SS-19 was first reported by Michael R. Gordon in an article to be published Friday in the weekly magazine National Journal. The information was confirmed today by Administration sources.

Some Officials Draw a Lesson

Present and former Government officials said one lesson to be drawn from the new estimate is that intelligence reports used as the basis for major decisions often seem fragile and uncertain. The intelligence agencies generally rely on the same data — in this case, observations of Soviet missile tests — but differ in interpretation.

A former national security official, referring to the revised estimate, said, "It shakes my confidence in our ability to know what the Soviets are doing."

The Pentagon estimates that the Soviet Union has deployed 300 SS-19 missiles with six warheads each, a total of 2,100 warheads. The 308 SS-18 missiles have 10 warheads each, a total of 3,080.

In 1977, the Central Intelligence Agency said the accuracy of the two missiles was improving faster than expected, posing the danger that by the early 1980's or sooner, they would be

able to wipe out the 1,000 American Minuteman missile silos in a pre-emptive strike.

That estimate was central to the view that the United States faced a "window of vulnerability."

It also influenced President Carter's approach to the arms control talks, officials said. The American negotiators had initially focused attention on the SS-18, and sought to negotiate a treaty limiting the size and destructive power of missiles. But after the C.I.A. estimate of 1977, the Carter Administration accepted an overall limit on numbers of multiple-warhead missiles and, because of Soviet resistance, set aside efforts to limit destructive power.

The 1977 estimate has continued to be influential. The Joint Chiefs of Staff told Congress in February in a report on the American military posture:

"Today, the most accurate versions of the SS-18 and SS-19 missiles are capable of destroying most time-urgent and hardened targets in an initial attack on the United States."

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger has frequently cited the accuracy of the two missiles in the same breath when arguing for the MX. A major justification for the MX has been the need to match the silo-killing ability of the two Soviet missiles.

Administration officials said the new estimate of the SS-19 was open to interpretation, but one official said the best

estimate of the missile's abilities was significantly lower than earlier estimates.

The National Journal article quotes a Pentagon official as saying that the new estimate had reduced the projected accuracy of the SS-19 by "better than a third."

The technical measure of missile accuracy is called circular error probability, which is the radius of a circle within which a warhead has a 50 percent probability of falling. The National Journal said the revised estimate had extended the radius from 1,000 feet to 1,300 feet. Administration officials said they would not dispute the National Journal figures.

A Pentagon official familiar with the report said that even if the estimate was accurate, it would still leave the Soviet Union with 3,000 more accurate warheads on SS-18 missiles, or three for every Minuteman silo.

One Administration arms control specialist said the new estimate might give the United States more time for missile modernization and might be used to defend the Administration's plan to put the MX missiles in fixed silos. Critics have said that the MX would be a sitting duck in fixed silos because of the accuracy of the Soviet missiles.