WINNOWING OUR WARHEADS

Arms-reduction talks with the U.S.S.R. compel us, the author argues, to re-examine our basic nuclear strategies.

The Washington Post
The New York Times MAG. Pg. 46
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 27 MAR 1988

ARMS CONTROL

By Stansfield Turner

THERE IS A HIGH RISK for the United States in the current strategic arms reduction talks, known as START, that call for a 50 percent reduction in strategic nuclear warheads. The risk is less in *what* we negotiate with the Russians than in *how* we divide up the 50 percent we would be allowed to retain. The prospect of a START agreement offers us an important opportunity to reassess our nuclear arsenal and the assumptions on which we have built it.

Over the past 43 years, we have permitted our nuclear arsenal to grow enormously. In round numbers, we have 2,300 warheads on three types of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's); 6,700 warheads on two types of sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM's), and 5,000 warheads — either bombs or air-launched cruise missiles — on two types of bombers. That adds up to a total of almost 14,000 warheads (some 2,000 more than the Russians have). All of our nuclear warheads have at least double the explosive power of the bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and most have much more than that.

By placing these weapons both on missile and bomber bases on land, and on submarines at sea, we have taken out insurance against a single surprise attack that could wipe out all of them. By having a mix of ballistic missiles that travel through space and bombs and cruise missiles that move in the atmosphere, we have complicated any defensive efforts by an enemy. The need to continue several types of basing and several methods of delivery must be considered in any program to reduce total numbers.

Another criterion is what uses we would put these weapons to, if needed. Because we have so many weapons, we have been able to support five different, yet overlapping, theories of use. If we must take a 50 percent reduction, we will no longer be able to afford the luxury of not making choices. If we were to cut all systems by 50 percent, some would no longer be viable. START will force us to re-evaluate the five basic theories behind our nuclear posture and choose among them.

Pre-emptive Strike. Under this theory, we would launch a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union first if we were confident the Russians were on the verge of attacking us. In so doing, we would hope to minimize damage to the United States by knocking out as many Soviet intercontinental nuclear weapons as we could locate. Today, that would require more than 3,000 warheads; after a 50 percent reduction of Soviet forces, we would still need about 2,000. We would want these warheads on ballistic missiles with a short time of flight (about 30 minutes) rather than on bombers or cruise missiles (several hours), if we hoped to catch the Russians without giving them enough warning to counter-launch out from under our attack. We would also want the warheads on land-based ICBM's because we are more certain of being able to get the firing orders to them promptly than to submarines at sea.

There is one problem, though. The Russians have ballistic missiles on submarines that we can't locate well enough to hope to target quickly. These alone could do us inestimable damage, no matter how successful our pre-emptive strike against their other nuclear forces. The invulnerability of these weapons is crucial, and yet it is our insistence on being prepared for a pre-emptive

Continued

strike against only the vulnerable portion of the Soviet force that drives up the number of nuclear weapons we stockpile. Each new nuclear weapon the Russians deploy demands two more on our side to give us assurance that we could knock it out. Our added weapons, in turn, make the Russians feel they are falling behind, and the nuclear-arms spiral continues upward.

Counterforce Retaliation. According to this theory, if the Russians were actually to strike us first with nuclear weapons, we would use our surviving forces to retaliate primarily at military targets. The concept behind this is that it is unlikely the Russians would terminate the war if their military machine were intact. In pursuit of this theory we today allocate thousands of nuclear warheads to the destruction of Soviet conventional, as well as nuclear, forces. Under START we would not have enough warheads to continue targeting all of these forces.

Mutual Assured Destruction. According to the MAD theory (which might more accurately be termed mutual assured vulnerability), it is the assurance that we could retaliate devastatingly that deters the Soviet Union from attacking us. Our ICBM's have very little assurance of surviving a deliberate Soviet attack, our bombers have modest assurance, and our ballistic-missile submarines have high assurance. Thus, our principal deterrent is the nuclear warheads we have in 36 ballistic-missile submarines; or, more specifically, the roughly 50 percent of those in submarines that actually are at sea at any given time and which are virtually invulnerable.

Under START, there is a proposed limit of 4,900 ballistic-missile warheads, either on land or at sea. After setting aside 2,000 of those for land-based ballistic missiles under the pre-emptive theory, we would have only 2,900 left for submarine missiles. That would limit us to about 15 submarines, compared with the 41 we maintained until just recently, when larger submarines began to replace older, smaller ones; and only 7 or 8 would be at sea and invulnerable, as compared with more than 20 just a few years ago. A modest breakthrough in submarine detection might allow the Russians to attack them, perhaps with a nuclear barrage of the areas where they suspected our submarines were. It would be foolhardy, in my opinion, to rely as heavily on MAD as we do today with only 7 or 8 ballistic-missile submarines at sea.

Flexible Response in Europe. This theory comes in two versions.

The first version holds that if there were a war in Europe and the Warsaw Pact were winning, the United States would launch a limited nuclear strike on the Soviet Union in the expectation that the Russians would halt the war as a result. The Russians might do that, but such a move would leave them vulnerable to further nuclear intimidation. Realistically, we must be prepared for them to retaliate with a similar nuclear attack on the United States. As citizens, we should ask whether we want so badly to defend our European allies that we would offer up our home towns as the targets for such retaliation. It is very unlikely, in my view, that any President would risk Chicago by attacking Kiev in order to defend Bonn.

The second variation holds that instead of attacking the Soviet Union, we would fire nuclear weapons at Warsaw Pact forces in Eastern Europe. That would be more acceptable to us, because any nuclear retaliation would likely be on Western Europe. Our West European allies, though, will be reluctant to make their territory a nuclear battleground. That is expressly why the West Germans have become anxious to negotiate away the very-short-range nuclear weapons which we now have in East and West Germany and which can do damage only to those two countries.

Adherence to either version of flexible response translates into resistance to START or other forms of nuclear-arms reductions. Flexible response is, after all, a war-fighting doctrine. Any prudent military man, when thinking in terms of fighting, will want more weapons rather than fewer. Arms-control agreements are bound to reduce his fighting options. In particular, belief in flexible response will create resistance to limiting our nuclear-capable aircraft in Europe under START, as well as to limiting the French and British nuclear forces.

Strategic Defense Initiative. Again, there are two versions of this, the S.D.I., theory. One is President Reagan's and the other, the Pentagon's.

The President's notion is that we build a cocoon over the entire United States that would be impregnable to ballistic missiles. To the degree we accomplish this, our concern with maintaining a mix of invulnerable nuclear forces for MAD diminishes. S.D.I. will be our deterrent.

Continued

3.

The Pentagon's theory postulates an S.D.I. capable of defending only a few specific locations, primarily where our fixed ICBM's are based. These weapons will be vulnerable without such defenses, but the cost of an S.D.I. to protect them could be justified only if, within the proposed limit of 4,900 ballistic missile warheads, we allocated a sizable number to fixed ICBM's.

THE QUESTION IS, can we afford to continue pursuing all five of these theories? The answer is no, partly because of the warhead limits in START, if those negotiations prove successful; and partly because of the number of expensive systems we are developing in support of these theories. The theorists of preemptive strike and counterforce retaliation have sold us on developing three new ICBM's; those supporting MAD have convinced us to buy new Trident submarines and missiles, two new bombers and a number of different cruise missiles, and those behind S.D.I. have encouraged us to spend billions of dollars for research.

Because of START and budget constraints, wrenching choices are going to have to be made. In my opinion, they should be:

Abandon the Pre-emptive Strike. No President, I believe, would ever initiate nuclear war with the Soviet Union because he had been told that the Russians were about to attack us. He would estimate that if he did launch nuclear weapons, the probability that the Russians would launch back would be almost 100 percent. I cannot imagine a Director of Central Intelligence ever having anything approaching 100 percent confidence in his prediction that the Russians were truly going to attack.

The President would be faced with a choice between the total probability of nuclear destruction on our soil and some lesser probability. And because there is no prospect that our pre-empting could limit damage to the United States to an acceptable level, he would likely wait it out. Abandoning the pre-emptive strike would mean that we would not need to assign 2,000 of our proposed limit of 4,900 ballistic missile warheads to ICBM's.

Place Severe Limits on Counterforce Targeting. Should the Russians ever intentionally attack the United States with a small number of nuclear weapons, a similar response would be mandatory. Otherwise, we would be the ones subject to further nuclear blackmail. Responding against a few military targets would be preferable to attacking cities, as it would be less likely to incite the Russians to escalate.

The question of how we should retaliate against a major nuclear attack on the United States is more complex, because it is difficult even to imagine what the impact of such an attack would be. A single warhead on a Soviet ballistic missile is typically the equivalent of one billion pounds of TNT. Just three of these would contain more explosive power than all of the bombs dropped by the United States on Germany during World War II. And the Russians have almost 10,000 such warheads or a potential for inflicting more than 3,000 times the damage done to Germany.

The death and destruction from the direct blast of these detonations would be only the beginning. The disruption of communications and transportation would bring our society to a halt. And nuclear radiation would not only kill countless others over time, but make many food supplies unusable and areas of the country uninhabitable. We should recall that the radiation effects of the minuscule explosion at Chernobyl in 1986 were felt as far away as Western Europe and Scandinavia.

It is only an academic nicety as to whether we should retaliate against Soviet cities or military installations. Any sizable retaliation on our part would devastate many of each, no matter where we aimed our weapons. To say, as some do, that it is immoral to target populations, but not military targets, is like trying to carve angels on the head of a pin. It is perfectly moral to deter nuclear war, and it happens that threatening the destruction of societies is the only means we have yet devised to do that. Moreover, if the Russians were to drop thousands of billions of pounds of destruction on our country, would we really be concerned with a moral distinction as to where our response happened to land? Thus it seems unwarranted to reserve large numbers of warheads for counterforce targeting of military bases.

Rely on Mutual Assured Destruction. Until S.D.I. or some other means of deterring nuclear war actually materializes, we must rely on MAD. Maximum survivability, then, and the ability to retaliate, must be our principal concerns when adjusting our nuclear force mix. For the foreseeable future this means relying heavily on ballistic missile submarines, and we should build almost as many of them as allowed within the START limit of 4,900 warheads for ballistic missiles. Still, it would be prudent to have one other kind of ballistic missile as a back-up.

11.

The two candidates currently being developed are the terrain-mobile Midgetman and the railroad version of the MX ICBM. The best bet is the Midgetman, which would be able to move continuously on roads and desert terrain. It would be far less vulnerable than the MX ICBM, which would only move out onto the nation's railroad system in a crisis. Midgetman is also advantageous under START because it has only one warhead, rather than the three on the MX. We could have three times as many Midgetmen as railroad MX under the warhead limits of START.

If we were to allocate 300 warheads to Midgetman, that would leave 4,600 for submarine missiles, or 24 ballistic missile submarines of the design we are now building, rather than the 15 we would have if 2,000 warheads were allocated to ICBM's. We could have even more submarines if we designed smaller ones with fewer missiles on each, albeit at increased expense. On top of that, there would be 300 single-warhead Midgetmen. Staying within these numerical limits would require abandoning 977 older Minutemen ICBM's and the 50 non-mobile MX ICBM's still being deployed.

Also, to maintain MAD we must make the very best use of the remaining 1,100 nuclear warheads likely to be allowed under START for cruise missiles. One expensive new bomber to carry them should be enough. I recommend the radar-eluding Stealth bomber, because either the aircraft itself or the missiles it launches should be able to penetrate Soviet defenses, whereas the new B-1 bomber is too vulnerable for penetration.

Further, the survivability of cruise missiles can be made quite high simply by increasing the types of launch platforms we employ: bombers, attack submarines, surface ships and land launchers (though the intermediate nuclear forces treaty recently signed rules out United States ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe).

Discard Flexible Response. It is only a matter of time before West Europeans acknowledge that flexible response is a charade, but its advocates contend that we must prolong the myth as long as possible. They fear that the West Europeans, especially the West Germans, when they recognize that our nuclear weapons do not provide real defense, will accede to political pressures from the Russians. My view is that the West Europeans will not risk their freedom that easily, and they have other choices.

One option is to spend more on conventional forces. It is easy to say that doing so would be politically unpopular, but the Europeans have been pushed to the wall before and have responded valiantly. Another option is to negotiate with the Warsaw Pact forces for asymmetrical reductions in conventional forces; and the Russians have at least professed some interest in such a possibility. Or we might well re-evaluate the threat posed by the Warsaw Pact, especially in light of the growing unrest the Russians are facing in Eastern Europe, across their line of march to Western Europe.

Flexible response is not only a myth, but a dangerous one. The United States military has been taught that it is our policy to resort quickly to nuclear weapons if the tide of battle turns against us in Western Europe. This mindset could easily result in a field commander's seizing the initiative and using nuclear weapons without authorization if communications broke down in battle. He could well believe that he had a mandate from his Commander in Chief to do so.

Abandon S.D.I. as a Limited Defense for ICBM's. The Pentagon's version of S.D.I. would be a much more costly way of reducing the vulnerability of ICBM's than the mobile Midgetman.

Pursue Research for a Nationwide S.D.I. Our perspective on the nationwide possibilities of S.D.I. has been warped by too much talk of deploying such a system within the next few years. That would be an S.D.I. for defending ICBM's, but it would only need to be capable of defeating 20 percent to 30 percent of an incoming attack to ensure survivability of sufficient ICBM's for retaliation. A nationwide system would need to defeat 99 percent to defend our people sufficiently. The difference in technical challenge is immense. In reality, a nationwide system is a long way off, and there is only a low probability that we will ever be able to achieve one. Still, we shouldn't abandon research. We simply do not know what technology may be able to produce. What we can afford is a slower pace of funding than we have at present, as there is little risk of the Russians over-

Continued

5.

taking us in this complex technology. Even if they did, we would still have a robust retaliatory force in our cruise missiles, since an S.D.I. cannot defend against them.

If it should become necessary to slow down the testing of S.D.I. in order to reach agreement on START, that would not necessarily be a setback for S.D.I. Rigorous research is only one way to make progress toward S.D.I. Another is to reduce the size of the Soviet nuclear threat and, hence, the technological challenge. That is best done through arms-control agreements. It is going to take both stunning technology and substantial arms control to produce a workable, nationwide S.D.I.

We and the Russians have been profligate in the amount of money we have spent on nuclear forces. And we both have been indifferent to the risks posed by simply possessing such numbers of nuclear weapons. Fifty percent reductions under START would be a large step in the right direction. Reducing the sum of our strategic arsenal from about 25,000 warheads to 12,500 would leave neither side lacking for destructive power. What the new limits on weapons would do is to force us to think through the kinds we should maintain. The choices we will face will be traumatic to some nuclear theories and theorists, but if we choose weapons backed by theories of deterrence and reject those based on war-fighting, we can advance the cause of nuclear stability. Unless we can do that, and do it well, we could end up less secure after START than before. ■

13.