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The MX Report: A Break With the Past

The essential recommendations of the President's Commission on Strategic Nuclear Forces are a major break with the past. Accordingly, the report and the recommendations it contains deserve serious attention from those concerned with national defense and arms control.

The commission proposes that we embark on a two-part strategic modernization program for intercontinental ballistic missiles. In the near term, we should deploy a limited number of MX missiles in Minuteman silos. At the same time, we should undertake R&D on a new, small ICBM carrying a single accurate warhead that could be deployed in the mid-1990s in either silos or a land mobile configuration. The commission has not recommended a move to a dyad with reliance only on submarines and bombers, although it acknowledges that technology, especially accuracy, could, at least theoretically, defeat fixed land-based systems absent arms control limits, or, more problematically, ballistic missile defense.

Unlike the past, the American people are not being presented with a single "solution" to the ICBM problem but rather a coherent program that permits alternative choices depending upon the outcome of arms control negotiations, Soviet responses to our actions, and technology developments.

The deployment of the MX missiles in Minuteman silos will demonstrate to the Soviets and to our allies that we have resolved to meet the continuing Soviet ICBM buildup. It will be the first modernization of our land-based ICBMs since the mid-1970s. In contrast, since 1972, the Soviets have deployed nearly 700 modern ICBMs, and are presently testing two new models. The MX will also provide the alliance with needed hard-target kill capability, which contributes to deterrence of a wide range of potential Soviet aggression, not just an all-out surprise attack.

Most importantly, the MX deployment presents the Soviets with the same dilemma we already confront. The Soviets will appreciate that a second round of MX deployment, beyond the initial 100 MXs recommended by the commission, could make their land-based force vulnerable. This will force the Soviets to choose between returning to the bargaining table to negotiate new agreements or seeking very expensive and uncertain new basing alternatives. But absent an MX deployment, the Soviets have no incentive, given the current strategic nuclear balance, to negotiate seriously; they threaten our land-based force, but we do not threaten theirs.

The president's commission is urging, as many defense experts have, that we seek to adopt a quite different currency

for negotiation at the bargaining table. In place of launcher limits advanced in SALT and START, we would propose limits on warheads and associated total yield, thus reversing the destabilizing trend of the past in which multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) were placed on a single booster. If a warhead and throwweight limit is adopted, over time both the Soviets and the United States have a clear incentive to pursue small, single-warhead ICBMs that individually are less lucrative targets.

The single-warhead missile may well be attractive if a warhead limit arms control agreement is reached, even if the Soviets retain large MIRVed missiles. The small missile offers a wider range of basing alternatives compared with the large MX missile, especially in mobile modes. The expense of deploying a given number of warheads in single-warhead missiles is not substantially greater than the MX, especially when the basing costs, almost certainly involving deceptive silo aim points to lower the target value of the MX, are included.

But should the Soviets decline to enter into a process leading to this more stable regime and continue to deploy MIRVed ICBMs, the program proposed by the commission offers several possible courses of action for the land-based component

of our strategic deterrent. We can deploy additional MXs in multiple super-hard silos, or perhaps even in a closely spaced silo configuration if the necessary R&D validates these concepts. We can elect to deploy a sufficient number of single-warhead missiles in fixed or mobile configurations. On the other hand, if the Soviets are willing to enter into a phased warhead agreement, the United States would limit both MX and small ICBM deployments, perhaps even trading the MX against Soviet SS18/19 missile reductions.

The assumptions underlying the program advanced by the commission are considerably different and potentially far-reaching when compared with past policy. In essence, the United States would be presenting an opportunity to move over time toward a more stable regime of small, single-warhead missiles in which the ratio of warheads to launchers is sharply reduced, thus lowering the calculated value of a first strike.

The contrast with the past is substantial. The commission does not claim that a single perfect solution exists for the ICBM problem. Instead it speaks in terms of a phased program with future choice for Congress and the president. The commission also steps back from the rhetoric of the need for invulnerability of the ICBMs to all-out nuclear attack. In-

stead, it stresses the mutually supporting survivability of the triad and the need to be concerned with deterrence of conflicts other than a strike out of the blue. The commission rejects past emphasis on launchers in arms control negotiations in favor of warheads, in recognition that improving stability should be our paramount objective.

Taken as a whole, the bipartisan committee recommendations point to an important new direction in strategic policy that better integrates future ICBM programs with arms control efforts. The new policy has three inseparable features: near-term deployment of MX, development of a new, small, single-warhead ICBM, and arms control initiatives directed toward limiting warheads and throwweight. Congress and the president must demonstrate support for all three aspects of the policy if it is to make sense. Pursuing the MX in Minuteman silos without the small ICBM and arms control is a dead end. Pursuing the small missile and arms control without an MX deployment would be futile.

The writer, dean of science at MIT and a former undersecretary of energy, served as a member of the President's Commission on Strategic Nuclear Forces.