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A Small, Survivable, Mobile ICBM

The Reagan administration can often be found these days, on strategic questions, wan-
dering longingly in the millennial mists. Al-
though there remains a tough stance against
Soviet ideology and against Soviet expansion
in the Third World, on strategic and nuclear
issues the administration’s heart is in a world
in which nuclear weapons are impotent and obso-
lete, in which it is safe to agree to abolish all
ballistic missiles by 1996, and in which SDI
may safely be forsworn, in some formulations,
sold at cost to the Soviets.

The administration has come closer than
many realists to following the recently published
advice of conservative SDI supporter Gregory
Fossedal. He recommends that the pro-SDI
right join with the antiaircraft left in a double-
flank assault against strategic stick-in-the-
muds—Fossedal identifies Sam Nunn, among oth-
ers—who insist on maintaining offensive
nuclear weapons to support that passive notion of
deterrence. From his end, Neil Kinock, the
British Labor Party leader, has also been doing
his best to implement this notion. On his recent
trip to the United States, he was happy to point
out that the administration’s willingness to
agree to abolish ballistic missiles within 10
years was consonant with his and the Labor
Party’s view that nuclear deterrence could
safely be scrapped.

But happily, even in the midst of its present
agonies, the administration managed last Fri-
day to bring itself, albeit reluctantly, to send a
lowly brigadier general out to announce one of
the most important strategic weapons decisions
that it or any administration has ever made: the
decision to move decisively toward mobility
and survivability for the U.S. ICBM force.

The most important part of the decision was
to begin full-scale engineering development for
a small mobile ICBM. The eventual numbers
deployed and the program’s pace are, in this
case, far less important than the trend this
decision initiates. The administration has now
joined Congress in bipartisan support for an
overall ICBM force that, each year, will
become less and less vulnerable to the large
MIRVed ICBMs, such as the SS-18, that are
the heart of the Soviet strategic forces.

Much media attention is being given to the
other major aspect of the mobility decision—
the plan to place MX missiles on rail cars in
millennium garrisons, thus making it possible,
during a nuclear crisis, for them to be deployed
on the nation’s rail system. In the absence of
the small mobile ICBM, which would be surviv-
able even against a Soviet bolt-from-the-blue
attack, such a rail garrison deployment for MX
would be ineffective in providing adequate sur-
varvability, since the garrisons would be even
easier targets than silos. The ICBM force
would thus not be survivable against a surprise
attack that was not preceded by a serious crisis
or by conventional hostilities. Garrisoned MXs
have vulnerabilities similar to those of bombers
on their bases, but bombers can escape much
faster. As Soviet accuracy improves, an ICBM
force that was deployed solely in silos and on
least a home that is superior to being housed in
Minuteman silos.

From an arms control perspective, the
important point is that last Friday the SS-18s
began to become a wasting asset for the
Soviets. Much of the support for the SDI
program, particularly the portions related to
boost-phase intercept of Soviet ICBMs, has
been premised on a similar objective—radically
undercutting the SS-18’s effectiveness. But the
small mobile ICBM will be available long before
this sort of SDI system could be deployed. The
Soviets now know that our having a mobile
ICBM will mean that, by the early 1990s, we
will be replacing silo-based missiles that are
vulnerable to the SS-18 with mobile ones that
are not. And the accuracy of the Trident II, MX
and small mobile missiles gives the Soviets added
reason to move away from large silo-
based ICBMs.

Arms control has been freed by this decision
from a crippling burden. Our major effort over
17 years of arms control negotiations on strat-
geic offensive systems has been dedicated to
proving the relative survivability of our own silo-
based ICBMs. To this end we have used, and
wasted, much negotiating leverage in trying to
get the Soviets to agree to restrictions on their
large MIRVed ICBMs. They have noted our
concern about survivability and have cheerfully
made it worse with their massive investments
in the programs we most want to restrict. Once
they are convinced that we can deal with our
problem of ICBM survivability without their
assistance, the Soviets are far more likely to
find an incentive to bargain seriously about
reductions.

While the administration is to be applauded
for its decision, one must also give credit to a
couple of congressional leaders—Les Aspin, Nunn,
Albert Gore, Norman Dickms, William Cohen,
John Warner and others—who have been willing
to try to break out of this cycle of political and
arms control stagnation. They have exerted
strong and persistent pressure over the last
several years for a survivable ICBM force.
Gore, in particular, has provided much of the
analysis and intellectual stimulus. In the nether
reaches of the Pentagon, the problem has also
been worked fairly and responsibly by the Air
Force, particularly by the brigadier generals—
give or take a rank or two—who, in the best
traditional, familiar and ever-important
themes—deterrence, survivability, the possi-
bility of careful step-by-step arms control—
played with new reverence and greater au-
thority. Forgive a discord now and then—they
have only occasionally performed together be-
fore. But we should all hope that the new
ensemble is in town for a long run. Theirs is the
sound of statesmanship.

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