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The Danger of the Zero Option; Instead, reduce INF forces to 100 warheads on each side.

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The administration appears to be moving rapidly to respond positively to Mikhail Gorbachev's offer to separate negotiations on intermediate nuclear forces from those on strategic offensive and defensive weapons. This makes tactical sense, to take advantage of Gorbachev's apparent desire -- or need -- to show movement in arms control. It may also be in the administration's interest to help demonstrate that the president's recent political wounds have not impaired his ability to function.

But what of the substance of the INF proposal itself? While the notion of reducing to zero intermediate-range weapons in Europe on both sides, with each allowed 100 warheads respectively in Soviet Asia and the United States, originally was a U.S. idea, it nonetheless has a number of troubling aspects. The prospect of eliminating an entire class of nuclear weapons in Europe is superficially attractive, but more serious examination of its implications reveals a very different picture.

The proposal is that the United States dismantle 572 warheads on Pershing II and cruise missiles and the Soviets dismantle 270 SS-20 missiles carrying 810 warheads currently based so as to be able to strike European targets. Even assuming that the administration pursues successfully its efforts to ensure adequate verification, there will remain at least three areas where the proposal fails to serve U.S. or NATO interests.

The first problem is at the purely military level. The proposal would leave the U.S.S.R. with 500 to 700 shorter-range missiles -- many deployed or at least moved to Eastern Europe ostensibly in response to the NATO INF deployment -- virtually unopposed. Their withdrawal from Czechoslovakia and East Germany, as Gorbachev has proposed, could, in a crisis, be reversed in a matter of hours. Not only would the zero option accentuate the nuclear imbalance in Europe. Since NATO's nuclear weapons were deployed in Europe principally to compensate for NATO conventional inferiority, the removal of the INF force would accentuate NATO conventional weakness as well.

The second problem lies in the area of strategy. NATO strategy is based on the concept of ensuring deterrence through a capability for flexible response -- the ability to respond to a Soviet attack in the most appropriate manner and to be able to escalate to whatever degree necessary to convince the Warsaw Pact that continuing its aggression would not be profitable. Removal of the INF force leaves a large gap in the capability for flexible response. The gap can be filled in part by tactical aircraft based in Europe that would be able to deliver either nuclear or conventional weapons, but those aircraft are also desperately needed at the conventional level. In addition, the proposal would be a significant step toward denuclearizing Europe, a longtime Soviet objective. Such an eventual step would wholly undercut NATO strategy, leaving no counter to Soviet conventional superiority except the use of U.S. strategic nuclear forces.

The third problem created by the zero option is political. The deployment of Pershings and cruise missiles after 1983

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was undertaken not simply to counter the SS-20 -- for which it is but a partial response -- but principally to reassure the Europeans that the United States was irrevocably linked to the defense of Europe with whatever forces were required to make it irrational for the Soviets to attack. The European governments, with considerable political courage, supported this deployment. Are they to tell their people that the sacrifice they called for such a short time ago is no longer needed? If the deployment was at its heart a political move strengthening the strategic ties between the two sides of the alliance, how can its reversal be seen as anything but a weakening of that linkage, especially at a time when the U.S. ICBM modernization effort is flagging?

In sum, the proposal in its current form is flawed. It is true that the United States first proposed the zero option in 1981. But having made that error, basically on grounds that the Soviets would never accept it, is no justification for persisting in it when its realization seems possible.

What should be done? A simple adjustment that would mitigate the worst aspects of the zero option would be to reduce the INF forces to 100 or so warheads on each side rather than zero. This less dramatic reduction would reassure the Europeans, leave NATO strategy intact, provide an opportunity to test the verification measures in practice and allow time for negotiations to deal with Soviet shorter-range missiles while we still retained some negotiating leverage.

If the administration has become fixated on zero INF for Europe, however, there are other alternatives. One possibility would be for the United States to develop and deploy a counter to the Soviet short-range nuclear systems, although the political prospects for such a move, both in the United States and in Europe, currently appear remote. Another possibility would be to refocus sufficient SDI funds to push the development of an anti-tactical ballistic missile system. This would be a desirable move quite apart from an INF arms control agreement. It could add much-needed survivability to U.S. INF forces and, properly done, could be fully accomplished within the ABM treaty.

Still another approach, at least in theory, would be a believable commitment to a significant improvement of NATO's conventional capability. But the alliance has failed for 35 years to provide an adequate conventional capability, and current circumstances do not appear particularly propitious for a change in that pattern.

This administration has for six years maintained so tough a line on arms control negotiations that it has been accused of seeking to destroy the very concept of arms control. Any agreement it pursues is therefore likely to be broadly welcomed, whatever its content. How ironic it would be if, after consistently disparaging the arms control agreements of its predecessors, the administration should end up with an agreement that, to an unparalleled degree, fails to serve the alliance. There is still time, but only if we recognize what it is we are in danger of doing to ourselves.

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