Reykjavik and the Future of NATO

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The Chinese have an old saying: "There is great confusion under heaven; the situation is excellent." This sums up rather neatly the current condition of Western security policy following the Reykjavik summit. At the summit, President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev wrote what is in many respects the most extraordinary chapter in the story--one with more than a few bizarre episodes--of international arms control efforts in the postwar era. As a result of this meeting, many of the comforting and familiar features of the Western security landscape appeared in a new and eerie light; many of the signposts on the way to the future were suddenly missing or altered in odd ways. All this is to say that for many people--and certainly for the majority of Europeans--the confusion of the situation is more evident than its excellence. Yet precisely by shaking the moral and political certainties that for too long have defeated serious thought about Europe's security problem, the post-Reykjavik environment offers an important opportunity.

The immediate source of the confusion stems from the fact that an American president generally accounted the most conservative in this century has emerged as the sponsor of the most radical program of disarmament seriously proposed by any postwar Western leader, while his European critics on all sides of the political spectrum seem suddenly to have rediscovered the virtues of nuclear weapons. It would be funny--were it not such a depressing testimony to the quality of the transatlantic debate

on these matters--that many of those who have for some time excoriated the president for his uncompromising attitude toward the Soviet Union now step forward to champion prudent approaches to security issues. As one European observer is said to have remarked: "The only thing worse than failure at the Reykjavik summit would have been success."

Leaving aside for the moment the question of the wisdom of the president's proposals at Reykjavik, it is probably a healthy thing for Europeans to reflect on the desirability of permitting arms control a central role in Western security policy. For if anything has undermined the American security guarantee to Western Europe in the last fifteen years, it has been arms control, in the form of the various strategic arms limitation agreements concluded between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In 1972, it should be recalled, the US agreed to a freeze on strategic offensive nuclear weapons; this actually placed it at a numerical disadvantage with respect to the Soviets in levels of ballistic missile launchers. Since then, it has come to be taken for granted that the US and USSR should have rough parity in these weapons. Unfortunately for Europe, the principle of US-Soviet parity in strategic weapons is fatal to the doctrine of "flexible response" which remains today the basis of NATO strategy, at least insofar as this strategy requires the US to initiate a nuclear exchange in the event that NATO appears on the verge of succumbing to a Soviet attack with conventional forces.

First use of nuclear weapons by NATO and the US only makes sense if the alliance enjoys some measurable superiority at the nuclear level. The primary effect of fifteen years of strategic arms control, however, has been to destroy the political legitimacy of Western, and in particular American, nuclear superiority. This is the core of NATO's current security dilemma.

On both sides of the Atlantic, there has been a tendency for NATO governments to look on arms control as a cost-free exercise in public relations. At the level of ideas, it has become virtually an axiom of academic and media discourse on these matters that the purpose of arms control is to ensure so-called "stability" by removing military incentives for aggression and fixing armaments at equal levels. Missing in all this is any real appreciation for the political dimension of arms control. By reducing the military confrontation between East and West to the technical problem of preserving "stability" through equalizing military capabilities, arms control has made a major contribution to the by now widely accepted idea of superpower equivalence. At the same time, arms control has a very different political impact in Western democracies than it does in the East. The centralized nature of Soviet decision-making and the absence of a meaningful public opinion give the Soviets an enormous advantage in dealing with Western governments in this contentious and emotionally charged area. Even were the Soviets endowed with superhuman virtue, they could not be expected to refrain from taking due advantage of this situation. Not only have they not

done so; they have increasingly made use of arms control as a weapon of political warfare against the Western alliance.

For reasons of history, ideology and geopolitical reality, only the Soviet Union poses a threat to the peace of Europe and the world. If this home truth is admitted, it would seem to follow that whatever makes the United States militarily stronger serves to deter Soviet aggression and keep the peace. That a NATO militarily superior to the Warsaw Pact would be seen by the Soviets to have, or would actually have, incentives for aggression is not only preposterous in itself, but contrary to the Soviet way of looking at these things (they think wars come about from political causes, not military-technical ones). Yet the arms control vogue of the last decade and a half has made it virtually impossible to make an open case for meaningful American or Western military superiority, either overall or in particular categories of weapons or theaters of conflict.

What is more, the political dynamics of arms control are such that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the West even to attain parity in categories where the Soviets are far ahead. In these cases, even the hypothetical possibility of concluding an agreement becomes an effective political argument for delaying or stopping the development or deployment of new weapons systems. A good example is the American MX missile. The current administration will be lucky if it protects the currently authorized buy of fifty MX against predictable attack by the newly Democratic Senate, let alone acquiring the additional fifty

Congress had committed itself to funding if a more survivable basing mode could be found for them. Under President Reagan's Democratic predecessor, the US planned to acquire two hundred of these missiles. The Soviets have over eight hundred land-based intercontinental missiles of comparable or greater size.

Another case in point is INF. The attempt to gain political acceptance in Europe for deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces--Pershing II ballistic missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs)--was complicated from the beginning by the inflation of arms control expectations accompanying it. In 1979, it will be recalled, NATO approved INF deployments only as part of a "two-track" policy of which the second track was arms control. The INF "zero option" proposed by the United States in 1982 is properly understood as a defensive expedient to shore up the legitimacy of these weapons through escalating the arms control bidding. At the time, it seemed unlikely that the Soviets would agree, and they didn't. Yet the prospect of some agreement, however remote, has made the pace and extent of deployment a perenially hot political issue in a number of allied countries. Now that Mr. Gorbachev has appeared to embrace the principle of the zero option, it can be confidently predicted that deployment of additional Pershings and GLCMs will be that much more difficult, even in the absence of real evidence that the details of a satisfactory INF agreement can be worked out.

But it would be unfair to blame arms control for all our problems. In fact, the arms control vogue is only symptomatic of

more far-reaching and profound failings in the Western approach to security issues. Arms control would not enjoy the dominance it now has over Western nuclear policy were it not for the lack of coherence and strategic integrity that have marked this policy for at least the last twenty years.

Europeans (and some Americans, such as former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger) have complained that the American proposal at Reykjavik to eliminate all ballistic missiles within ten years would mean the end of the policy of flexible response and necessitate a major buildup of NATO's conventional forces in Europe. This proposal, it is claimed, gives an uncomfortable aura of realism to long-standing Soviet proposals for general and complete disarmament and a denuclearized world. Assuming that nuclear weapons can indeed be abolished or reduced to very low levels, it is said, the world will be made safe for conventional war, or more precisely, for the Soviets to take advantage of their overwhelming conventional superiority to pose an even greater threat to the security of Europe and to world peace. These complaints assume that NATO now has and will retain some meaningful superiority in nuclear ballistic missiles, as called for by the doctrine of flexible response. As argued a moment ago, however, such an assumption is totally unwarranted. The fact of the matter is that flexible response is a badly shredded garment. If we face up to the reality of NATO's situation, we have to acknowledge that the emperor's wardrobe is in desperate shape, and that the need to rethink NATO strategy lies not ten years in the future, but today.

What might serve as the basis of a new NATO strategy? In the first place, it needs to be said that the elimination of ballistic missiles as proposed by the United States would not be incompatible with the maintenance of a credible strategic nuclear deterrent. The US and NATO could still pose a threat to the USSR and the Warsaw Pact by way of medium and long-range bombers, just as they did during the era of massive retaliation in the 1950's. Yet the political realities of the 1980's have to be kept in mind. In a political environment profoundly penetrated by anti-nuclear assumptions and expectations, it is hard to see how the West can win any competition with the Soviets in nuclear offensive weapons. Hence, an offensive air threat cannot be counted on to maintain (or restore) extended deterrence of a Soviet conventional attack on NATO.

In this perspective, the wisdom of the course followed by President Reagan at Reykjavik becomes visible. If extended deterrence of the Soviet conventional threat requires some margin of Western superiority in a critical strategic area, it may be suggested that the first and most fundamental step is for the United States to shift the emphasis in its own strategic posture from the offense to the defense. By refusing to trade his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) for cuts in Soviet offensive nuclear forces, the president showed that he understands very well the paramount importance for the United States and the West generally of persevering in the project to develop effective defenses against ballistic missile attack.

The SDI has been greeted with scepticism if not outright hostility by most Europeans, for reasons that are understandable only in part. That a move to ballistic missile defense somehow represents an escalation of the arms race and the militarization of space is an argument that falls apart as soon as one makes a basic acquaintaince with Soviet military space activity and the Soviet doctrinal and programmatic commitment over many years to strategic defense in all its forms. British and French concern over the viability of their independent nuclear forces in a heavily defended world must be treated sympathetically by the United States, but it is difficult to escape the impression of a certain wishful thinking in British and French assumptions about the effectiveness of current and prospective Soviet anti-missile defenses.

What is truly unfathomable, however, is the frequently heard European claim that an SDI would "decouple" the US from the defense of NATO. It is difficult to know how the US could have fewer incentives than it currently has to use its strategic nuclear forces for the defense of Europe. It is true that the acquisition of modern survivable and counterforce-capable strategic weapons in the 1990's--the MX, the Trident D-5 submarine-launched missile, a small mobile ICBM, and new strategic bombers--will improve the situation considerably, provided these programs do not self-destruct at the hands of the US Congress. Yet with or without these weapons, even a very imperfect first-generation SDI would greatly strengthen

deterrence of a Soviet attack in Europe by making it much more likely that the US would muster the will to use whatever strategic offensive forces it happened to possess. It would do so in the first instance by providing essential protection for the political and military command structure of the nation. In the second place, it would create a relatively secure NATO rear that would permit mobilization of US conventional forces and the reinforcement and resupply of US and NATO units in Europe. Nothing is likely to so dramatically improve the deterrent effect of American military power as a plausible capability for supporting a protracted global conflict with the Soviet Union. Only strategic defenses will provide such a capability, not any number of new missiles.

The fundamental point is that Europeans cannot reasonably ask the United States to join them in a mutual suicide pact, when perfectly achievable and affordable alternatives exist for the defense of the Western alliance as a whole. That the deterrent value of an SDI is likely to be far greater than its Western critics want to concede is suggested by the neuralgic Soviet reaction to it. The fact of the matter is that even a fifty percent cut in Soviet offensive strategic forces--the levels agreed at Reykjavik--would only marginally inconvenience Soviet planning for a disabling ballistic missile strike against the United States, while even a very imperfect SDI would create incalculable problems for the Soviet general staff. As just mentioned, it would eliminate the possibility of easy victory

through decapitation of the US political and military leadership, and it would greatly lessen the Soviets' confidence in their ability to do significant damage to American strategic nuclear forces in a surprise attack. Given the fact that random attack on urban populations has always lacked elementary strategic sense in the Soviet view, an SDI deployment would go a long way toward decreasing Soviet incentives to initiate war of any kind against the West.

None of this is to suggest, though, that an SDI will solve all of NATO's problems. With or without a Reykjavik-type agreement, NATO needs to improve its posture on the ground. While there are certainly reasons for concern about the ability and willingness of NATO governments to beef up their conventional forces, counsels of despair on this score seem premature. In fact, there are good reasons for thinking that the West will enjoy increasing advantages on the high-tech conventional battlefield of the 1990's. New technologies for "deep strike" as well as the deployment of several types of first-generation stealth aircraft will have a significant impact on the European balance as a whole. At the same time, there are indications that the renewed attention being given to strategic defenses by the United States is stimulating awareness of the gross deficiencies in existing NATO defenses against air and short-range missile attack. Significant leverage can be gained against the Warsaw Pact by a determined NATO effort to upgrade its air defense capabilities. This most emphatically includes a new missile

system that protects against Soviet short-range ballistic missiles, whether nuclear, conventional or chemical.

It is tempting to suggest in conclusion that Reykjavik is finally irrelevant to Western security. In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that the Soviets intend to keep any general war at the conventional level if they can, and that first use of nuclear weapons by NATO under any circumstances is becoming ever more incredible.

Having said this, however, it needs to be added at once that there seems very little likelihood that nuclear weapons will be abolished. Nuclear weapons are political symbols almost more than military instruments, and it is difficult to believe that any of the world's nuclear powers (including Britain and France) is truly prepared to give them up. In addition, enormous problems of verification will arise in any agreement on deep nuclear reductions: it is far from clear that the West will be able to achieve even reasonably satisfactory on-site inspection arrangements within Soviet territory.

But what is more fundamentally troubling about Reykjavik are the political intangibles. It is clear that the United States has taken a long step toward legitimizing the notion of truly radical arms control or disarmament. For the reasons indicated, a large question mark hangs over this move. It is not clear that the West can ever hope to outbid the Soviets in the disarmament game, and the damage to the morale of Western publics in the process is potentially incalculable. So long as the Soviet Union

is what it is, there can be no substitute for strong Western defenses, no matter how devoutly Western governments or publics may wish otherwise.

- superiority - ~~no effect~~ fruitless ((Cuba?))
- nature of USSR   defense v D-5 ?
  equivalence - Sov view
- SDI - partial v total defenses
  ATBM
  air def not taken seriously by US Army
- three views of R
  - US free of nuc commit
  - limited goal of US leadership
    - domestic squabbling
  - US will not commit Eur
- Europeans working together + US out of Eur
- Sov view