

Euromissile Myths

AP/ By Josef Joffe WY

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WASHINGTON — Is America trying to ram Pershing 2 and cruise missiles down Europeans' throats? That myth, cultivated by Western European foes of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's plans to install medium-range missiles, has begun to spread on this side of the Atlantic.

Western European indictment of supposed American arrogance is coupled with a prescription by some American sympathizers: Let's not force something on the Europeans they do not want. It dovetails with the speech by Yuri V. Andropov, who proposed to reduce — actually, to relocate — portions of his medium-range-missile arsenal behind the Urals in order to forestall Western counterdeployment. Finally, it is linked to another myth: From the beginning, the critics claim, there never has been a sound strategic rationale for the Pershing 2's and cruises.

The first myth is rooted in a misreading of history. No other alliance policy has been debated more democratically and exhaustively than the Brussels decision of December 1979, to install 572 Pershing and cruise missiles starting in December 1983 if arms-control negotiations with Moscow failed. In those days, it was the Carter Administration that was rather reluctant to place new missiles on the Continent. It was rattled Europeans who insisted that something be done about SS-20's, being deployed in the Soviet Union at the menacing rate of one per week.

It is not true that the West wants to threaten the Soviet Union with missiles that lack a plausible rationale. There are two very good reasons for deploying the missiles in Europe. One pertains to arms control. In the late 70's, the West correctly understood that appeals to sweet reason would not persuade the Kremlin to dismantle a powerful nuclear arsenal that it was expanding with breathtaking speed. There are no free gifts in international affairs. Empty-handed, the West would appear as a supplicant at the bargaining table. And negotiations would degenerate into a meaningless ritual unless the West stood ready to counter the buildup.

The second reason relates to the complicated business of deterrence. While 300,000 American troops in Europe constitute a very powerful warning, sheer numbers are not enough in an age of atomic abundance. Nuclear weapons can be deterred only by nuclear weapons, and NATO's arms are no longer sufficient for the task. There are, to be sure, thousands of short-range tactical weapons in Western Europe. Unfortunately, these can hardly impress the Russians because they are bound to devastate alliance territory first and foremost. There are also hundreds of

nuclear strike aircraft. Yet most of these obsolete planes, destined for the scrap heap, are no match for the Warsaw Pact's large-scale air defenses.

In short, NATO has plenty of nuclear weapons, but the wrong kind. Hence, the long-overdue decision to deploy missiles that can strike deep and swiftly. Compared to some 1,300 long-range warheads the Kremlin can hurl into Western Europe, that is a modest number — barely enough for deterrence; not enough for launching a war.

Apart from the numbers game, there is a more profound reason why land-based American missiles contribute to deterrence in Europe. The Soviet Union has never drawn a distinction between "theater" and "strategic" nuclear systems. To the Kremlin, any weapon that can strike the Soviet Union is strategic — whence it follows that the Soviet Union would have to attack part of America's strategic arsenal in the process of attacking Western Europe.

Would the Russians confine opening salvos to America's Europe-based system only — aiming, as it were, at their adversary's switchblade while leaving his sword untouched? By their own logic, the Russians would have to attack America's entire nuclear panoply. As a recent Soviet propaganda tract put it: "Any pre-emptive strike [against Europe] is senseless unless it destroys or at least substantially weakens the strategic nuclear potential of the other side's retaliatory capability." Such a decision, raising the specter of all-out war, is not lightly taken, and therein lies the very essence of extended deterrence on behalf of nonnuclear allies.

Those who believe in extended deterrence might still argue that it makes little sense to do what its logic requires if determined Western European minorities are prepared to prevent deployment at any cost. If we accept such counsel, the lesson will not be lost on Moscow, which will learn that it can have military dominance cost-free. And it will learn that Western societies do not cherish their democratic processes enough to defend them against the onslaught of the strident few. A devout wish for peace alone does not produce peace, and the mere desire for arms control has never achieved an equitable agreement. Because NATO has held fast to its Brussels decision, Moscow, as the Andropov speech indicated, finally has begun to talk disarmament. If the West loses its nerve now, it will have neither missiles nor arms control. And the Soviet Union will have gotten something for nothing.

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