

The INF fallout.

CRUISIN' FOR A BRUISIN'

SINCE 1981 the United States and the Soviet Union have been trying to work out disarmament à deux—in outer space, in the strategic arena down below, and in the European theater, where U.S. cruise missiles and Pershing IIs are arrayed against the notorious SS-20s and a whole family of lesser SS designations. Unable to agree on the two big-ticket items—strategic offense and defense—the superpowers are about to strike a “historic” deal (the “double-zero”) on the Euromissiles. If it comes to pass, two entire categories of nuclear weapons will disappear: those in the 1,000- to 5,000-kilometer range and those in the 500- to 1,000-kilometer range.

The Soviets recently dragged a half-forgotten hybrid system to center stage—the 700-kilometer “Pershing Ia,” owned by the West Germans but with warheads in American custody. The Soviets began to portray those 72 outworn missiles as the last “insurmountable” obstacle in the talks. It was a nice way to test the strength of Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s center-right coalition and the resilience of Bonn’s American connection—and the Soviets won. Facing “gentle persuasion” from Washington, indifference from Paris and London, and a loudly anti-nuclear Socialist opposition, Kohl caved in. The joint U.S.-German Pershing venture, in place for a quarter century, will go once the two superpowers finish dismantling their Euro-arsenals.

Though an INF agreement will eliminate only about three percent of the world’s stockpile, the appellation “historic” is perhaps no exaggeration. It would be the first time two great powers actually agreed to *scrap* weapons, and not just to limit their growth (as in SALT) or to demilitarize a particular piece of real estate. It would also be the first time that the swords-into-plowshares business would be effected by voluntary and bilateral contract. Historically there has been plenty of enforced disarmament, imposed by the victors on the losers, and of unilateral arms cuts whereby nations decide on force reductions for their own reasons.

Nevertheless, even if the entire Soviet Euro-force goes to the scrap heap, the United States will gain no security. None of these 600-odd missiles is capable of hitting the American homeland. The Russians, on the other hand, would get rid of 424 U.S. Pershing II and cruise missiles (the planned total was 572), all of which can reach into the Soviet Union. True, the Soviets lose some nuclear options, but help is already on the way. They are about to deploy the mobile, variable-range SS-24 with ten warheads apiece. Officially classified as “intercontinental,” these missiles fall outside the scope of an INF treaty. Yet with a range between 3,000 and 9,000 kilometers, they can be launched as easily against Bonn as against Boston.

The Western Europeans are not amused by what they see unfolding in the aftermath of Reykjavik. What may be a sideshow for the two great powers happens to be the main event for those, especially the nuclear haves-nots, who must share the continent with a very big neighbor to the east who will always command a surfeit of nuclear weapons. Nor are the Europeans assured by the “Big Twoism” that brought us double-zero. Right after Reykjavik, French prime minister Jacques Chirac invoked the oldest of Western Europe’s traumas: once more, “decisions vital to the security of Europe could be taken without Europe really having any say in the matter.”

The Europeans brought this upon themselves. In 1981 West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt pressured President Reagan to offer the original “zero option”—removal of all intermediate nuclear forces from Europe—in order to get badly needed relief from his anti-nuclear tormentors in the streets and in his own Socialist party. Given the wave of anti-nuclear (and in part anti-American) pacifism then sweeping Western Europe, the “zero option” looked like a wonderful ploy: Would any Russian leader be so stupid as to let go of his great Euro-strategic advantage?

Six years later, with American INFs in place in Europe, Gorbachev accepted the 1981 offer. Hoping to stop the momentum, the Western Europeans, and the West Germans above all, retorted: “What about your shorter-range missiles, where you have an intolerable monopoly?” Again, Gorbachev’s “stupidity” triumphed. He told them: “You can have those, too.” It was an offer nobody now dares refuse.

On the face of it, Gorbachev’s offer looks great: what is known in the trade as “asymmetric reduction.” He is willing to yield 1,300 warheads for a mere 424 deployed by NATO. Why not take the missiles and run? Answer: because if Gorbachev wants to give away so much for so little, then his idea of a loss and a gain must obviously be different from ours. Needless to say, Gorbachev knows what he’s doing.

FIRST, in offering double-zero, he invited NATO to get rid of its most modern weapons, the Pershing II and cruise missiles, and to forgo deployment on the next level down. The alliance will thus have to fall back on its nuclear-equipped aircraft, most of which cannot make it beyond Poland and all of which run the risk of being destroyed by a pre-emptive strike before takeoff. If they do get off the ground, they may still not make it to their targets; Warsaw Pact territory is the most lethal air-defense environment in the world. By contrast, there is no effective defense yet developed against Pershing II and cruise missiles.

The second catch is conceptual. Nuclear weapons in Europe, especially those that could pierce the Soviet sanctuary, represented the core of Western Europe’s defenses. They were installed to counter a natural Soviet advantage and a congenital Western European weakness:

Russia's preponderance as a nearby superpower and the half-continent's inability (or unwillingness) to field the men and matériel for a conventional defense.

In other words, Gorbachev has proposed not to start with the *basic* imbalance, the geographical-conventional one, but with precisely those weapons deployed to *neutralize* that imbalance. And thus Gorbachev's new thinking turns out to be not so different from the old. "Denuclearization" has been the watchword of Soviet policy since the beginning of NATO. The Soviets fought the insertion of tactical nuclear weapons in the 1950s, and unleashed a massive campaign against NATO's "two-track decision" of 1979 that led to the deployment of Pershing II and cruise missiles. Moscow's nuclear options do not depend on this or that Euromissile. Meanwhile, the drawdown of Western nuclear weapons will unshackle Russia's advantage in troops and tanks, aircraft and artillery.

The third catch is psychological. In the age of "parity" consecrated by the first SALT treaty of 1972, the Europeans have always sought safety in nuclear arrangements that obliterate the distinction between local and global war. Pershing II and cruise missiles standing in the path of a Soviet advance might just go off (whereas a Minuteman III stationed in Montana might not), destroying along with Kiev any dream of a war neatly confined between some Central European "firewalls."

Take out long-range INF, and the idea of a war that begins and ends in Central Europe is no longer as absurd as it once was. The shorter the ranges, the deader the Germans who are the prize and the pillar of Europe's postwar order. Which is why an unwritten law of NATO states that Germany must not be what geography has condemned it to be: the venue and victim of East-West war in Europe. Hence the United States has endlessly sought to reassure the Germans with dispositions that threaten to blur the distinction between regional and global war. Yet by leaving in place 4,600 nuclear weapons mainly destined to explode in Germany, double-zero deepens the most powerful "contradiction" within the alliance. In their classic nightmare the Germans play host and target for weapons that will devastate Germany only, and that nightmare presents diplomatic opportunities for the Russians that hardly need belaboring.

TO RESTORE equilibrium, the Germans will have to reduce the reasons the Soviets might have to threaten them. The name for this used to be "appeasement." Interestingly enough, Chancellor Kohl's rightish coalition partner, Franz Josef Strauss's Christian Social Union, has already run this theme up the flagpole. Once there are "zones of differential security," a just-published position paper warns darkly, the "Alliance will lose its meaning. Inevitably, this will engender a reorientation of German foreign policy." Thus the right joins the left on a common platform of neutralist nationalism.

President Reagan's "historic" agreement exposes the West Germans, the holders of the European balance, to a separate nuclear threat and all of Western Europe to the

lengthening shadow of Soviet conventional might. From Gorbachev's point of view, not a bad political prize for the price of a few hundred expendable missiles.

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