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A Small, Survivable, Mobile ICBM

The Reagan administration can often be found these days, on strategic questions, wandering longingly in the millennial mists. Although 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 obsolete, in which it is safe to agree to abolish all ballistic missiles by 1996, and in which SDI may safely be given (or, in some formulations, sold at cost) to the Soviets.

The administration has come closer than many realize to following the recently published advice of conservative SDI supporter Gregory Fossedal. He recommends that the pro-SDI right join with the antinuclear left in a double-flank assault against strategic stick-in-the-muds—Fossedal identifies Sam Nunn, among others—who insist on maintaining offensive nuclear weapons to support that passé notion of deterrence. From his end, Neil Kinnock, 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 Friday 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 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 military 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 survivable even against a Soviet bolt-from-the-blue attack, such a rail garrison deployment for MX would be ineffective in providing adequate survivability, 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 rails in garrisons would not be independently survivable against surprise attack and thus would not constitute an independent leg of the triad. And rail-garrisoned MXs and silo-based missiles alone could not serve one of the most important functions of an ICBM force—to be a hedge against any Soviet breakthroughs in antisubmarine warfare, unlikely but not unimaginable, that would endanger the heart of our survivable deterrent: the ballistic missile submarines.

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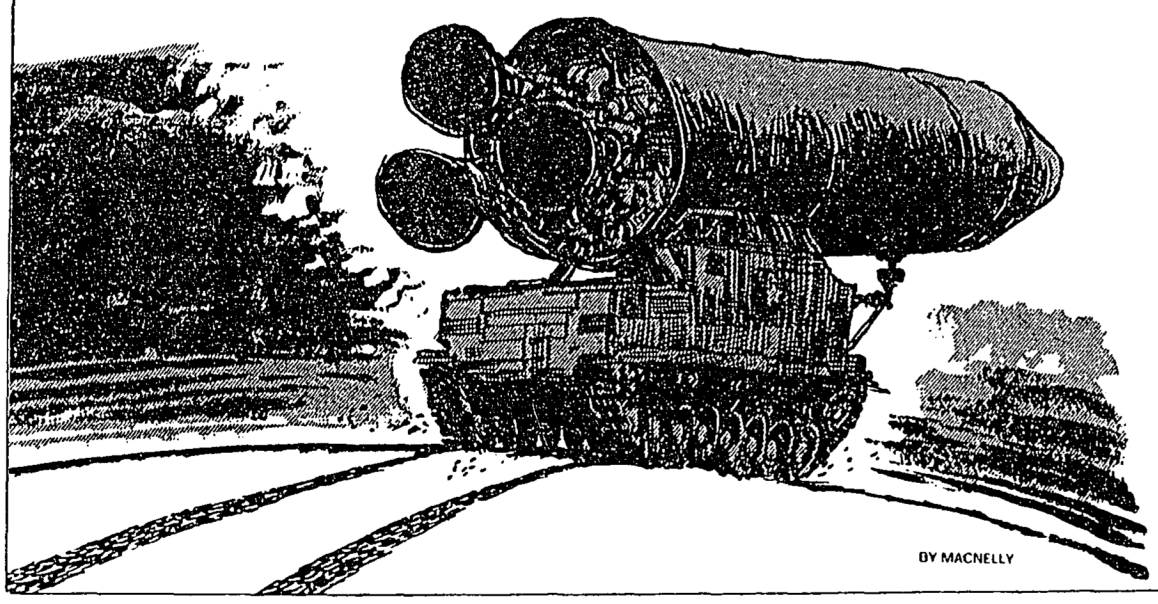
With a survivable, small mobile ICBM program in place, however, a garrisoned rail-mobile MX may prove to be a reasonable solution to the MX-basing dilemma. Careful study and probing questions about this and other MX-basing alternatives are appropriate. But if the MX force on rail looks to be highly survivable once it has been alerted and is some hours safely away from its garrisons, then, assuming this scheme proves to be roughly comparable in cost to silo basing, the MX may finally have found a reasonable home for the long run—at 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-18s' 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 strategic offensive systems has been dedicated to preserving the 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 few congressional leaders—Les Aspin, Nunn, Albert Gore, Norman Dicks, William Cohen, John Warner and others—who long ago began 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 military tradition, have stepped front and center and taken on a very tough assignment.

But no one in the country has seen this extraordinarily difficult problem more clearly, maneuvered more adroitly and taken more hostile fire in trying to resolve it than House Armed Services Committee Chairman Aspin. An odd-looking group, this: Aspin and the B.G.s. Listen carefully to them and you'll hear some traditional, familiar and ever-important themes—deterrence, survivability, the possibility of careful step-by-step arms control—played with new resonance and greater authority. Forgive a discord now and then—they have only occasionally performed together before. 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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