Matter of Fact . . . . By Joseph Alsop

The Transportable ICBM

ON the basis of all the available evidence, the American analysts now assume that the Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles and their launching pads are transportable.

Alsop

On its face, this may not look like an especially grave or significant piece of news. In reality, however, this news is considerably more disturbing than all the reports of all the Soviet successes in outer space laid end to end and multiplied by two. The reasons for being disturbed are easily understood, when our own immobile ICBM weapons system is compared with the presumed Soviet system.

Both the American ICBM's already in production, the Atlas, and the next to be produced, the Titan, are designed to be fired from fixed pads. The launching pads themselves are huge and costly installations, which add heavily to the expense of the missile program. The first three Atlas squadrons will also be "soft" and the next five squadrons will be "semi-soft"—meaning that an enemy missile falling almost anywhere in the vicinity will destroy one of our missiles or its launching pad.

BY digging huge concrete pits for the launching pads, the squadrons to be activated after mid-1962 will be "hardened"—meaning that the destruction of any ICBM in these squadrons will cost the enemy a considerable number of ICBMs. "Hardening is of the utmost importance, since it multiplies the enemy's minimum requirement of missiles for a first strike by a factor of much more than ten. But the "hardened" squadrons, like the "soft" and "semi-soft" squadrons, will still have to fire from costly fixed positions.

Until the solid-fuelled Minuteman missile comes into production, the United States will have no transportable ICBM. Until a date at least four or five years ahead, therefore, the Kremlin will know just where to find all the nerve-centers of American ICBM strength. With this knowledge, if the Soviets build enough missiles for the job, the can hope to destroy the whole panoply of American ICBMs in a single surprise attack.

IN contrast, if the Soviet ICBMs and their launching pads are indeed transportable, the planners in the Pentagon can never know precisely where they are. Like our own ICBMs, to be sure, the Soviet model now in production is thought to be liquid-fuelled (although there are minority doubts, even about this). If liquid-fuelled, the Soviet ICBMs can hardly be fired from positions too distant from a rail line. But they can nonetheless be fired from any point where the far-spreading Soviet rail net can carry the special flatcars for the missiles and launching pads, the special tank cars for fuel and the like.

The first rule of the missile balance is that you cannot attempt a first strike, unless you can be sure that your first strike will cripple or prevent the other side's counter strike. Otherwise, your first strike is simply the first stage in a suicide pact. Equally, you cannot hope to cripple or prevent the other side's counterstrike if you do not know whether the other side's striking power is emplaced. If the Pentagon planners only know that the Soviet ICBMs must be somewhere close to the Soviet rail net, this is not good enough to permit a first strike.

HENCE the assumption that the Soviet ICBMs are transportable puts a much darker color on a picture that was already quite dark enough. To be sure, the President has repeatedly proclaimed, at his press conferences, that a democratic society can never strike the first blow in an H-bomb war. Thus it is tempting to argue that the transportability of Soviet ICBMs hardly matters.

Yet it does matter, and quite enormously, for two reasons. On the one hand, a transportable ICBM is both harder to build and, by any imaginable test, operationally superior to an ICBM that must be fired from a fixed launching pad. Thus the assumed transportability of the Soviet missiles further emphasizes the Soviet lead in missile development.

On the other hand, there is all the difference in the world between the President telling Khrushchev and company that they are immune to surprise attack by the West's nuclear power; and Khrushchev and company knowing they are immune to surprise attacks because their own nuclear power is beyond the West's reach. All the President's assurances could never eliminate a lingering-deterrent doubt. But if this doubt is automatically eliminated by the character of the Soviet ICBMs the West's deterrent will be seriously weakened, both strategically and politically.