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Officials in Washington Disagree on Meaning of Such a Program

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 9 —

A secret report circulating at the highest levels of the Johnson Administration declares that the Soviet Union is giving top priority to efforts to develop multiple warheads for its big missiles.

If the report is correct and if the Soviet effort succeeds, it means that Moscow could increase severalfold its ability to hit a number of targets in the United States simultaneously.

One intercontinental ballistic missile with a cluster of warheads could conceivably direct different warheads at Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Washington.

Officials are reluctant to discuss the report further, except to say that it is based on a thorough analysis. The report does not base its conclusions on test firings.

Administration officials discounted news reports late last year that the Russians were working on multiple warheads. Now, after an exhaustive investigation, the new intelligence analysis being studied in the Johnson Administration asserts that the Russians are indeed making a major effort in this direction.

Administration strategists disagree on the consequences of this development. Some are concerned; others insist there is as yet no cause for alarm.

All agree that the United States is well ahead in multiple-warhead technology, with working models of two improved ICBM's carrying such warheads ready for use in 1969 and 1970. The Russians are thought to be at least five to seven years away from operational multiple warheads.

Fuel Added to Debate

The report is adding fuel to the debate among American nuclear planners over the shifting balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The House Armed Services Committee gave notice of its growing concern recently when it requested a panel of retired officers to study the strategic balance between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Working from nonsecret sources, the panel, headed by Gen. Bernard A. Schriever, retired, commander of the Air Force Systems Command, reported:

"The preponderance of evidence points to a conclusion that the Soviet Union is succeeding in its massive drive toward strategic military superiority and that the United States is cooperating in this effort by slowing down its side of the arms race."

Feel Report Missed Point

Administration planners, no matter what their position in the internal debate, tend to agree that the Schriever report missed the point in focusing on the total "megatonnage" of nuclear bombs and missiles that each side could rain on the other, rather than on the total number of warheads each would be able to launch with existing ICBM's and those soon to be ready.

Since each warhead mounted on a multiple-warhead missile can be guided accurately to a predetermined target, the old arguments about relative numbers of ICBM's are obsolete, Government analysts agree.

The resulting argument is between those who want to pursue a strategy of "assured destruction" and those who favor "damage limitation."

Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and some of his civilian aides would, essentially, limit United States strategic weapons to that number and kind that would provide assurance that no matter how the enemy might choose to start nuclear war, he would lose tens of millions of his population, and much of his industry under United States retaliation.

That, they argue, should deter any rational decision to start a nuclear exchange.

This is the "assured destruction" strategy; its emphasis is on offensive rather than defensive missiles.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and some others, would go further. They urge construction of enough offensive and defensive systems so that if deterrence fails and nuclear war results, deaths in the United States may be limited.

Mr. McNamara and his advisers doubt that this is feasible. The Russians, they say, would be compelled to counteract a bigger American effort, leading only to a speedup of the arms race with no one the better or safer.

The Joint Chiefs take the position that limits of economy, technology and productivity would effectively prevent the Soviet Union from matching or overcoming a larger American effort.

Point to New Finding

Some officials guardedly pointed to this new finding as a vindication of Mr. McNamara's argument that Moscow would respond to weaponry moves by Washington with proper countermoves.

In their view, the Soviet Union has decided that the United States will deploy the Nike-X antimissile system around the country and it wants to make sure it can penetrate the system by being able to send swarms of warheads against it to exhaust the defense.

It was because of a similar assumption — that the Russians would put in a broad antimissile defense — that the United States went ahead with multiple warheads for the Minuteman-3 and Poseidon missiles, these officials say.

The Administration is expected to go ahead this fall with a fairly thin deployment of Nike-X missiles designed to withstand a modest Chinese missile attack. Some analysts point out that the Russians have to guard against the possibility that this may later be expanded to defend against a heavier Soviet assault.

Other analysts, however, are more concerned. The Russians, they say, now have about 450 ICBM's and are building new ones at the rate of about 150 to 200 a year. A significant number of these missiles are large enough to carry sizable packages of warheads, perhaps five, ten or more.

Since the United States has publicly limited itself to 1,000

Minuteman missiles, at known sites, this argument goes, the Russians might be trying to achieve the ability to destroy enough of these missiles in a first strike so that their defense then could intercept most of the Minutemen, Polaris and Poseidon missiles that would be left.

These analysts do not expect the Soviet Union to build feverishly to the day when they might consider a surprise attack. Rather, they see them trying to reverse the strategic balance so that they can pursue a bolder foreign policy, perhaps

with more "wars of national liberation," such as the one in Vietnam in greater confidence that if a nuclear war should erupt, Soviet society could survive it.

But other officials argue that if it later appears that Moscow is bent on such a course, the Minutemen can be replaced by a mobile missile system that would be harder to destroy in a surprise attack, and that more multiple warheads can be deployed to overwhelm any defense the Russians might construct.

A Pentagon official explained

the new mathematics of multiple warheads with the following hypothetical missile choice:

If you had to choose between a new missile that would carry either one 10-megaton warhead or a package of a dozen 50-kiloton warheads, which would make more sense? At first, the larger, single warhead would seem the best choice, since it would provide almost 17 times more explosive force. (A megaton yields explosive power equivalent to a million tons of TNT; a kiloton to 1,000 tons.)