

MIRV and the Offensive Missile Race

By ROBERT KLEIMAN

Pressure from Congress and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a heavy antiballistic-missile (ABM) system oriented to defense against Soviet attack reflects an old military weakness: preparing to fight the last war.

Technology has overtaken the ABM. The United States already has developed an effective antidote to it—sophisticated multiple warheads for the new offensive missiles, Minuteman III and Poseidon, which are to be deployed in the early 1970's. Official estimates indicate that the Soviet Union can do the same in five to seven years.

Whatever the case for a "light" ABM defense against primitive Chinese missiles, arguments for either superpower to build a \$40-billion missile defense to protect its cities against the other are now as dated as the Billy Mitchell bomber-vs.-battleship fight.

A hitherto-secret four-letter acronym, MIRV—Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicles, and the key word is "independent"—describes an advance in nuclear weaponry that will enable the offense to penetrate any defense now foreseeable.

"Both our missile defense system and [Russia's] were designed before MIRV's came along as a serious possibility," Secretary McNamara admits.

One MIRV missile will be able to carry five or ten or more hydrogen warheads that can separate in flight, change trajectory several times and fly independently to five or ten or

more widely dispersed, preselected targets. Equipped with MIRV, America's 1,700 strategic missiles could carry 17,000 or more separately targetable warheads, dwarfing the widely discussed Soviet increase this past year from 300 to about 450 single-warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's).

Early in the ABM debate, Secretary McNamara predicted that the Soviet Union and the United States would respond to the other's ABM deployment, if undertaken, by improving offensive capabilities. "All we would accomplish," the Defense Secretary said, "would be to increase greatly both their defense expenditures and ours without any gain in real security to either side."

But now, before substantial ABM systems have been deployed on either side, rapidly advancing technology has vaulted Washington and Moscow into the offensive missile race that was feared for the post-ABM period. And this race is far more dangerous and difficult to control than the race in missile defenses which the U.S. seeks to head off.

The vast increase in offensive warheads that MIRV can provide will spur fear by each that the other is achieving first-strike capability that permits pre-emptive attack.

Extraordinary advances in missile accuracy add to this fear. There was a time when ten incoming missiles were required to destroy one hardened

ICBM and its single warhead in an underground silo. A one-for-one exchange is now almost attainable.

In the MIRV era, allowing for misfires and misses, ten missiles carrying 100 warheads will be able to destroy 80 to 90 ICBM's caught in their silos, thus wiping out 800 to 900 enemy warheads. If those 800 to 900 were launched first, the other side would need at least 800 to 900 antimissile missiles to intercept most of them.

The logic of this arithmetic—by increasing the fear that the other side may pre-empt—could turn the relative stability of mutual deterrence into a nightmare of nuclear nervousness.

Can this era still be headed off? Soviet-American talks on the limitation of offensive and defensive missiles have been pending since February. But Moscow has dallied in fixing a date, agreement within the Government evidently not easy.

There have been repeated hints that a concrete American proposal, rather than a plan for exploratory talks, would enable the Soviet leadership to shape an agreed policy more easily. Conversely, the lack of a firm date for a conference makes it difficult for the divided Washington bureaucracy to reach inter-agency agreement on a specific proposal; a deadline would force agreement.

Secretary Rusk told the Soviet Union in early September that, once a date was fixed, American negotiators would

come to a conference with "specific and detailed proposals." Some of these proposals may have to be made in advance to get a Soviet response. But Washington is still unprepared to make them, despite months of desultory inter-agency consultations.

Here is a field in which the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Congressional Joint Atomic Energy Committee could make invaluable contributions. Instead of pressure to race in the building of obsolete defensive missile systems, what is needed is a plan to limit the ABM-MIRV race. It will not be easy.

Spy satellites can count ABM's and offensive missile silos without the on-site inspection Russia has always refused. But they cannot tell whether a MIRV-tipped missile contains five or fifty hydrogen warheads. New approaches to arms control need devising.

The tragedy is that both the United States and the Soviet Union, according to Secretary McNamara, already have strategic nuclear arsenals "greatly in excess" of their present security needs. And "we're planning another big increase" in offensive capability that will be able to overcome "the most powerful defenses the Soviets could build," Mr. McNamara has warned.

With Moscow, presumably, making a similar plan, time clearly is running out.

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