

Why Inspection May No Longer Be Critical for

Arms Control

WASHINGTON—For the past decade every significant arms control proposal has run afoul of the issue of inspection. Now for a fleeting moment, thanks to a development nobody wants to talk about, the two superpowers may have a chance to reach some arms control agreements without the odious requirement of intrusive on-site inspections.

One of those rare concatenations is happening where a political interest in limiting strategic weapons is being reinforced by a technical development permitting such an agreement to be verified.

The development involves one of the most remarkable and yet unsung accomplishments of the space age—reconnaissance satellites that can perform feats of intelligence beyond the capacity of the best cloak-and-dagger spy. More important in terms of arms control agreements, these satellites from unseen altitudes of 100 miles or so can substitute in many ways for the on-site inspector.

The United States hinted at the possibility of using reconnaissance satellites to monitor an arms control agreement last week at the Geneva disarmament conference when it modified its proposal for a cutoff in the production of fissionable materials for atomic weapons. In the past, to verify such an agreement, the United States had proposed that there be inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency of all the plutonium reactors, uranium gaseous diffusion plants and chemical separation centers which the nuclear powers declared were no longer producing materials for weapons.

In addition, the United States had proposed that each side have the right of on-site inspection to check on "undeclared" plants that might still be in clandestine production. It is this latter demand that the United States dropped. The reason, although it was never explicitly stated, was that this country now can rely on reconnaissance satellites to check for clandestine plants.

The American proposal was summarily rejected as really nothing new by Aleksel N. Roshchin, the Soviet delegate to the conference. Furthermore, he objected that the proposal would not contribute to the reduction of existing atomic arsenals and

designed for military uses in the U.S.A."

There was some merit in Mr. Roshchin's objection. The United States now has so many nuclear warheads that it can cannibalize obsolete weapons to obtain most if not all the fissionable materials it needs for new weapons. Thus a cutoff in fissionable materials production would not necessarily lead to any significant reduction in existing arsenals, although it might place some constraints on the development of new weapons systems, such as a ballistic missile defense system with its thousands of warheads.

But in summarily rejecting the proposal, the Soviet Union may have overlooked its underlying significance. For all the acknowledged one-upmanship in the proposal, the United States also was sending up a signal that it was ready to consider using "national means of verification" to monitor some types of arms control agreements, such as a limitation on strategic missiles.

"National means of verification" is the euphemism used for reconnaissance satellites. It is so euphemistic that even disarmament officials are under some constraints in describing the new opportunities for arms controls that have been opened up by these satellites.

Thus, in the April issue of Foreign Affairs, William C. Foster, the former director of the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, commented that "our verification capabilities using 'national means' alone are considerably greater than it has been possible, so far, to reveal."

The reconnaissance satellites circle the earth on a regular basis, sending back packets of film that are routinely recovered by planes over the Pacific. The method of re-entry into the atmosphere is similar to that for manned capsules. A plane with a trapezoid device then catches the vehicle's parachute shrouds.

The United States has never officially acknowledged the existence of these satellites. There have been some hints, however, of their remarkable photographic capacity.

Sen. George D. Aiken, a member of the Joint Congressional Atomic Energy Committee, observed last week that from an altitude of 50 miles a reconnaissance satellite could detect a

cloth had been placed over a small picnic table.

In recent weeks there have been some hints from high Administration officials on the kind of intelligence information that can be obtained from these satellites. Thus at his March 14 news conference, President Nixon noted that the Soviet Union has deployed 67 ABMs around Moscow. And then before Congressional committees, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird disclosed that the Soviet Union has constructed two shipyards for turning out atomic submarines.

This information undoubtedly was obtained from reconnaissance satellites, and yet the Administration would never admit that. Indeed, there was considerable private consternation when the President used the exact figure of 67 ABMs—a figure that had been treated until then as a top secret to conceal the capacities of the satellites.

These satellites can even determine to a large extent what the Russians are doing behind closed doors. It is possible to tell whether a building houses a gaseous diffusion plant or an atomic reactor, for example, by its size and shape.

Unless both the United States and the Soviet Union seize immediately upon the opportunities opened up by reconnaissance satellites, they may miss the chance for a strategic arms control agreement. In the not too distant future, both sides are going to begin mounting multiple warheads on their intercontinental ballistic missiles and once that happens the chance will have been lost for monitoring an agreement with reconnaissance satellites because the satellites can only detect the missile silo—not the number of warheads on the missile. Both sides then will have been pushed back into the quagmire of on-site inspections.

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