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Why Gorbachev Needs an Arms Agreement

It's a tough dilemma for the Kremlin's new leader—strike a deal in Geneva or face fresh dangers at home.

More than any Soviet leader in the past decade, Mikhail Gorbachev must be acutely aware of what his country stands to gain—or lose—in the Geneva arms talks.

Gorbachev is taking power at a time when the Soviet Union faces mounting difficulties in keeping up in an escalating superpower arms race. Soviet-affairs analysts say that stiffer competition with Washington involves serious risks for Gorbachev economically, politically and militarily—particularly if it extends into space as a consequence of President Reagan's Star Wars plan.

Even if the new Kremlin leader accepts the economic and political dangers of a stepped-up arms race, most experts believe that the Soviet Union would compete at a sharp disadvantage because of the country's lag in technology. This prospect, maintains Arnold Horelick, a former top Soviet specialist at the Central Intelligence Agency, gives the Kremlin an incentive to strike a deal at Geneva to gain much-needed breathing space.

Now an analyst at the Rand Corporation, a California think tank, he says: "They will be very anxious to stop a new competition, at our pace, in very high-tech weapons."

Does all this mean that the Soviets will be willing to pay a high price at Geneva to get an agreement? Most experts believe that over the next year or so Gorbachev will wage psychological warfare, hoping to force the U.S. to give up its massive military challenge in space without significant concessions on the part of Moscow.

Only if Gorbachev is convinced that this propaganda campaign is a failure will he feel compelled to make the hard choice: Pay the price necessary

to get an arms pact at Geneva or accept the risks of an accelerated weapons race.

The top concern of Soviet policymakers is the widening gap in technology, with the U.S.S.R. lagging far behind the United States. Even with an all-out drive, analysts say, Moscow still would need a decade to catch up.

These experts note that the Soviet Union comes nowhere close to the U.S. in computers, microelectronics, lasers, robotics and other areas that critically affect the future arms race. As Marshall Goldman, associate director of Harvard's Russian Research Center, puts it: "Technologically, the Soviets are out of it, and they feel they'll be out of it a long time."

What makes Soviet backwardness especially worrisome for the Kremlin is a revolutionary Pentagon strategy embracing supertechnologies in its conventional-war planning as well as

20-year struggle to get ahead... they find themselves confronted with an analogous struggle to stay ahead."

Military implications aside, Reagan's challenge may worsen the U.S.S.R.'s already acute economic woes by forcing the Kremlin into even higher defense outlays.

The Soviet Union is grappling with a host of crucial issues—one of its worst crop failures in recent years, stagnant oil output, a rickety industrial plant and a shrinking labor pool.

In this situation, expanded arms outlays can be financed only by putting a tighter squeeze on Soviet consumers, a development the Kremlin is loath to contemplate at this time.

High risk. With the arms budget now absorbing 13 percent or more of Soviet gross national product, the CIA claims that the U.S.S.R. could hike military spending only at the risk of heightening political tensions at home. Over time, in the CIA view, this "could even provoke a crisis between the regime and Soviet society."

The heavy cost of a stepped-up arms race, some analysts believe, also would pose serious new problems for the Soviet Union in its Eastern European empire. Moscow already faces fresh trouble with its satellites after decisions to curtail subsidized-oil shipments and other trade benefits for these nations. The result is a festering resentment directed at the Kremlin.

Taken together, these factors are seen as strong incentives for Gorbachev eventually to work out an understanding to temper the pace of the arms race and, above all, to forestall a major U.S. drive in space.

True, there is scant evidence of this so far in the arms talks that opened March 12 with Moscow's negotiators taking a tough stand. Kremlin leaders hope to exploit potential disunity among Western allies and mounting pressure for defense cutbacks in the U.S. to force Reagan's hand.

But in all this, Gorbachev can ill afford to ignore the hazard for the Soviets of a failure at Geneva that fuels a massive new arms race. In the words of ex-CIA analyst Horelick: "Moscow has reason to view prospective trends... as distinctly unfavorable."

By ROBERT S. DUDNEY with NICHOLAS DANIELOFF in Moscow.



space research. Of greatest concern to Moscow is Reagan's 26-billion-dollar proposal to develop a Star Wars defense shield against nuclear attack.

The Soviets suffer three major handicaps in efforts to meet the American challenge in space—

Computers. The U.S.S.R. has not built even a so-called fourth-generation computer that the U.S. has discarded as too primitive.

Space vehicles. Soviet space operations still experience major malfunctions of automated equipment.

Surveillance. The Kremlin suffers repeated failures of sensors needed to detect and track missiles in flight.

Because of such shortcomings, the Soviets fear that the U.S. may regain a strategic edge. "These dilemmas must seem cruel to the Soviet leadership," notes Lt. Gen. William Odom, the Army's intelligence chief. "After a

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