

4/20/83

21

## ONE CHEER FOR THE SCOWCROFT COMMISSION

The Commission on Strategic Forces, chaired by retired Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, which was empaneled three months ago by Ronald Reagan to examine the future of America's Intercontinental Ballistic Missile force, last week released its recommendations. They were promptly endorsed by the President. One of the most important recommendations is that the U.S. be ready, by the early 1990s, to deploy a force of small, single warhead ICBMs. If deployed survivably, a force of such missiles would greatly enhance deterrence of nuclear attack and support NATO's strategy of Flexible Response. The Commission convincingly argues this point in its report. An ICBM weighing a relatively light 15 tons can be deployed in a number of survivable basing modes, providing the flexibility needed to meet a variety of Soviet strategic challenges. A force of small, single warhead ICBMs would also enhance strategic stability by distributing U.S. missile megatonnage over a large number of launch platforms, thereby reducing the value of individual missiles as targets.

Small, single warhead ICBMs, moreover, could spur the kind of arms control that would significantly reduce deployed nuclear weapons. An arms control agreement that would require both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. to dismantle their multiple warhead ICBMs for an equal level of single warhead ICBMs would result in a massive reduction of destructive nuclear power.

For its stand on the small ICBM, the Commission earns one cheer. It fails, however, to address adequately the most serious strategic problem facing the nation--that America's land-based missiles currently are vulnerable to Soviet surprise attack. It is puzzling, for instance, that the Commission does not recommend a crash program for the small ICBM. The Commission apparently feels that ICBM vulnerability is not an urgent problem because the Soviets could not destroy both the U.S. ICBM force and the alert bomber force at the same time, leaving the U.S. with plenty of deterrent capability with its bombers and missile firing submarines.

To be sure, there is no precise measure of what is essential for credible nuclear deterrence. Nuclear strategists under Democratic as well as Republican administrations, however, have agreed that prudent deterrence requires that the U.S. have the capability of denying military victory to the Soviet Union through controlled, limited attacks on Soviet military assets, including hardened targets. The U.S. cannot implement this nuclear strategy without survivable land-based ICBMs.

America's missile firing submarines are poor weapons for controlled limited retaliation. For one thing, communicating with them is difficult. For another, a submarine which fires only some of its missiles risks detection and destruction. Large missile submarines are a strategic reserve for massive retaliation. Bombers, meanwhile, must be used within the first eight hours of a conflict because of loss of bases. They lack the capability for prompt retaliation and face formidable and improving Soviet air defenses. A survivable land-based ICBM force, on the other hand, meets the critical needs of endurance, prompt retaliatory capability, targeting flexibility and secure command and control. Survivable ICBMs are not merely a redundant third leg in the Triad; they are the foundation of deterrence.

It is therefore essential that the U.S. reduce its ICBM vulnerability as rapidly as possible--and the early 1990s are not soon enough. There is no reason why the small ICBM could not be ready before the end of this decade. After all, it took only four years from go-ahead to initial deployment of America's first ICBM.

Another option would be to deploy the MX in a multiple protective shelter (MPS) system using perhaps several hundred super-hardened silos. Indeed, the Scowcroft Commission concluded that deploying the MX in an MPS system "meets the need of long-term survivability reasonably well." It unfortunately rejected this option because it mistakenly feels MX survivability is not important enough to press the issue against political opposition based upon environmental and cost factors. The Commission instead recommended deployment of 100 MX missiles in existing Minuteman silos. Although these are vulnerable to Soviet attack, a case can be made for deployment of MX as an interim measure until Congress and the Administration can work out a proper survivable MPS basing mode for the missile. Not all ICBMs will be destroyed in a Soviet first strike, and each surviving MX will provide ten good counterforce warheads to enhance U.S. nuclear retaliatory capability and thereby deterrence.

Deployment of the MX, moreover, would give the U.S. an ongoing missile program to hedge against possible developmental problems in the small ICBM program. In any event, deployment of a new American ICBM is almost certainly necessary to induce the Soviets to negotiate seriously about nuclear arms reductions.

The U.S. needs a survivable ICBM, whether it is the MX or the small ICBM--and needs it as quickly as possible. The Scowcroft Commission clearly recognizes the need to modernize the U.S. ICBM force in response to a Soviet nuclear threat "in excess of any military requirement for defense." Its timetable is what is flawed. The nation would be better served--and defended--had the Commission and the Administration explicitly recognized the urgent pace by which the Soviet ICBM threat must be countered.

Robert Foelber  
Policy Analyst

---

For further information:

Robert Foelber, "MX and Strategic Survival," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 254.

Colin S. Gray, Strategy and the MX (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1980).

Francis P. Hoerber, "Strategic Forces" in Arms, Men, and Military Budgets, Issues for Fiscal Year 1981 (New York: National Strategy Information Center, 1980).