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The Presidential Commission looks beyond basing modes to postulate a force mix to deter a uniquely Soviet adversary.

Abiding Realities and Strategic Needs

By Colin S. Gray

In the conclusions to its recent report, the President's Commission on Strategic Forces encapsulated the major problem: "Finally, the Commission is particularly mindful of the importance of achieving a greater degree of national consensus with respect to our strategic deployments and arms control."

Although it is too early to claim definitive success, at least there is a strong probability that the Commission may have achieved what seemed almost impossible only a few months ago – the forging of a politically workable consensus that is generically supportive of the ICBM program. Without playing down the contentiousness of some details discussed below, the carefully crafted package of arguments contained in the report has effected what appears to be a sea change in the terms of debate over ICBMs. Early in 1983, the public debate shifted rapidly from the issue of "which MX basing mode?" to the fundamental question of "why does the United States need an ICBM force at all?"

Critics of the Reagan Administration have insisted that the President take proper account of all the recommendations of his Commission – with particular reference to the arms-control arguments. In its turn, the Administration is insisting that the Congress, too, take all the recommendations into due account, with specific and immediate reference to the report's strong endorsement of MX deployment.

Prominent among the virtues of the Commission Report is its skillful interweaving of elements that are very dear to the hearts of different constituencies. However, given the heat the ICBM and arms-control controversies have generated in past years, and given the skepticism that pervades the ranks of those who debate these issues, the interwoven character of the arguments in the Report is a potential source of major weakness, as well as an element of strength.

Everyone prefers a Chinese menu, from which they can pick and choose the items they prefer. The Commission Report is a set meal with no substitutes permitted as yet. This situation will probably change, of course, as the Soviet Union responds to a new Commission-inspired START proposal, and as critically important details concerning the new, proposed small ICBM begin to emerge.

Overall, whatever one thinks of the merits of the Commission Report, it would seem to have bought time for a renewed, much more bipartisan approach to the evolution of the ICBM

program and to related issues of arms control. By any standard, that is a major achievement – given the terms of the debate following congressional rejection in December 1982 of Closely Spaced Basing for the MX.

Changing the Question

The Commission decided, early on, that the question that had been central to ICBM debate for the previous four years could not be answered in a positive way with any prospect that the solution (or solutions) offered would fare any better politically than had previous technically ingenious answers.

The problem impossible of resolution is defined as follows in the Report: “How can a force consisting of relatively large, accurate land-based ICBMs be deployed quickly and be made survivable, even when it is viewed in isolation from the rest of our strategic forces, in the face of increasingly accurate threatened attacks by large numbers of warheads – and how can this be done under arms-control agreements that limit or reduce launcher numbers?”

The Commission did not so much pass negative judgments on the array of MX basing modes that have been the focus of recent controversy; rather, it broadened the question. The question was reformulated to ask what kind of total mix of strategic forces the United States should sustain and develop to deter a uniquely soviet adversary. The case for ICBMs in general and the MX in particular flowed naturally and very persuasively from that analysis.

Prior to its discussion of the details of the ICBM program, the Commission Report provides a compelling and relentless argument regarding deterrence. The Report broadens the sense in which strategic stability is discussed, away from examining the possible implication of theoretically vulnerable ICBMs in silos toward the strategic (and hence political) instability that would be the consequence were Soviet leaders to believe that they could coerce the West through intimidation or through military action on a limited scale. The Report stresses again and again the need for the US to “be able to put at risk those types of Soviet targets – including hardened ones, such as military command bunkers and facilities, missile silos and other storage, and the rest – which the Soviet leaders have given every indication by their actions they value most, and which constitute their tools of control and power.”

The Report goes on to argue that “a one-sided strategic condition in which the Soviet Union could effectively destroy the whole range of strategic targets in the United States, but we could not effectively destroy a similar range of targets in the Soviet Union, would be extremely unstable over the long run.”

Hence, for the quality of deterrence mandated by the overseas security commitments of the United States, *vis-à-vis* a Soviet state not known to be overly squeamish over prospective loss of life among its civilian population, the distinctive attributes of an ICBM force are essential.

Denying any crumb of comfort to those still attracted by counter-city, assured-destruction reasoning, the Report concludes its discussion of deterrence with the flat assertion that “...the deterrent effect of our strategic forces is not something separate and apart from the ability of those forces to be used against the tools by which the Soviet leaders maintain their power. Deterrence, on the contrary, requires military effectiveness.”

Given what the Report has to say later on about the uncertainties of communication with submarines and about the accuracy of submarine-launched ballistic missiles, it must follow that the US has no responsible policy choice other than to modernize its ICBM force.

Basing the MX

The Commission Report was compelled to tread a narrow line between endorsing the traditional verities of crisis stability, which have as their centerpiece the axiom that forces should not be so deployed as to invite preemptive attack, and stressing the deterrent and stability merits of forces not independently survivable. In essence, the Report says that the independent survivability of ICBMs is desirable, but not truly essential (so long, that is, as the Soviet Union lacks an SLBM force sufficiently accurate as to pose a prompt threat simultaneously to missile silos and to bomber bases, and so long as there is no serious doubt concerning the invulnerability of submarines).

The Report argues "... whereas it is highly desirable that a component of the strategic forces be survivable when it is viewed separately, it makes a major contribution to deterrence even if its survivability depends in substantial measure on the existence of one of the other components of the force."

Independent survivability traditionally has been an attribute of the ICBM force, and it has been the endeavor to continue this feature that has convulsed defense politics since the late 1970s. What merit is there in the Commission's judgment that the silo housing of 100 MX missiles will be a "good enough" solution to the problem of providing the prompt hard-target counterforce capability that the United States needs for deterrence or for escalation control?

On balance, the Commission is surely correct. With reference to day-in, day-out diplomacy, and to most phases of crises, silo housing for the MX will be quite good enough. An MX-armed United States will have an appropriate competitive response to the counterforce challenge posed by Soviet fourth-generation ICBMs. A United States so armed will pose a credible prompt threat to many of the most valuable assets of the Soviet state. This will be a more dangerous United States, in Soviet eyes, which will be healthy for deterrence.

Politically, as Commission members have stressed, it would be very damaging were the United States to "fail the course" on MX deployment. Notwithstanding the excellent military and arms-control rationales for a modest MX deployment, by far the strongest argument lies in the realm of Soviet and Western-allied political perception. Four presidents have endorsed the MX missile as essential to American security.

Moreover, the deterrence arguments for the MX are so strong that a failure to field this system would be, and would be seen abroad to be, an unambiguous failure of the American political system to do that which it acknowledges to be strategically necessary.

Strong though the case is for MX basing in silos, it must not be forgotten that it is a politically coerced choice. There are good reasons why it is desirable, if not absolutely essential, for the ICBM force to be independently survivable. There is tension between the argument of the Commission that MX deployment is urgently needed because of the value for deterrence stability of the potency of the threat it will pose, and the counter-argument that silo-basing will be "good enough" because of the survivability inherent in the triad.

The stronger the Administration makes its argument for the deterrence value of the threat posed by MX, the stronger it has to acknowledge the Soviet incentive to neutralize that threat. Notwithstanding the large and different threats posed by the bomber and SSBN forces, it is undesirable that (for the late 1980s and 1990s) the most militarily effective American strategic weapon should not be able to ride out an attack.

The Commission has not sought to deny the validity of the concern, though it has – rightly – stressed the extreme nature of the scenario. Theoretically, vulnerable basing in silos could prove to be fatal for crisis stability only in a situation where the Soviet Union was willing to launch a massive attack against the ICBM fields, thereby giving tactical warning for US manned bombers and cruise missile carriers to take off, and assuming that a US President would not – or would not be able to – launch ICBMs on warning or under attack. Should the Soviet Union attack US bomber bases first, the Commission Report notes that launch of the MX/Minuteman force would be a case of “launch *after* attack – launch after massive nuclear detonations had already occurred on US soil.”

Overall, one must grant that the case against silo basing of the MX rests upon a long-odds scenario. In this context, the Soviet leadership might choose to escalate to central, out-of-theater war because of the quality of threat it confronted in the MX force, because, in theory, the MX force could be neutralized, and because they would reason that the US would have to employ the MX promptly for fear of losing it.

Although long-odds scenarios do turn up, the odds in this case can be lengthened still further in the US's favor. Above all else, the US can increase the technical plausibility of launch under, and after, attack for the silo-housed MX force. It may be very important that Soviet leaders not believe that their SLBMs could pin down the MX, or disrupt its command and control, pending arrival of the hard-target killing ICBM salvos. In addition, it is far from obvious that silo housing the MX is incompatible with independent survivability. The technical promise of silo super-hardening (as developed in connection with the discarded Closely Spaced Basing option) is almost certainly far greater than the Commission Report suggests.

It is probably fair to say that there really is no controversy over the silo housing of the MX. Everybody would prefer an independently survivable basing mode, but those preferences are so diverse as to make it almost certainly impossible to construct a politically workable and that will enable the US to field the missile to enhance the stability of deterrence through the remainder of this century.

The Small ICBM

In endorsing survivability – in part to compensate for the silo-housing proposal for the MX – the Commission recommended development of a small, single-warhead ICBM. Commission members have had to be careful lest they paint so attractive a picture of the small missile that it be used as an excuse for the near-term abortion of the MX. Such a small missile would have many attractive features in comparison with the MX. Its small size and weight would facilitate agile deployment, and its single warhead would render the missile a relatively low-value target. According to classic criteria of stability, the proliferation of small ICBMs should be an important gain.

However, attractive though the idea of the small missile is, the Commission is understandably nervous lest the idea be overemphasized. The Commission Report is careful not to suggest that MX is an interim solution – though housing in non-survivable Minuteman silos may be only an interim measure – pending availability of the small missile. On the contrary, the Commission said that it “would not insist on seeking a single solution to all the problems, - near-term and long-term – with which the ICBM force must cope, “Plainly, the Report looks to an ICBM mix of MX and the small missile (and perhaps some residual Minuteman missile).

The Commission, and the Administration, is right to insist upon the MX, not only because of the powerful political-perceptual reasons cited earlier, but also because the US ICBM inventory should contain a force of missiles with a throw-weight sufficiently large to permit high-yield warheads, provision of penetration aids against the far-from-trivial possibility of Soviet deployment of much more extensive active missile defense and the delivery of space assets into orbit.

Without denying the attractiveness of the small ICBM, there is a host of reasons why its prospective development should not be permitted to have an adverse impact on MX deployment. First, the small missile, at present, is a "vu-graph system." Opinions differ as to the rapidity with which the missile can be developed. While there would seem to be no associated high technical risks, the fact remains that a strategically significant number of small ICBMs could not be deployed before the period of 1993-95 (assuming an initial operational capability in 1992).

Second, although newspaper readers may be excused the belief that the Commission, Rep. Albert Gore, Jr., and Henry Kissinger have just discovered the idea of the small ICBM, this idea has been studied off and on for nearly twenty years. Although small size and low weight would facilitate agility in deployment, just how would a smaller ICBM be deployed? And at what cost?

The kind of truck-borne mobility to which a small missile would lend itself is plainly a political impossibility because of public interface. Paradoxically, given the advantages over the MX of ease of handling, it is at least arguable that the basing problems of a small missile could prove to be no more tractable than those of the larger missile. There is no cheap and simple way to deploy and operate a force of many hundreds of small ICBMs. Suggestions that the small missile might be deployed in very heavily armored vehicles for mobility on military reservations are simply suggestions.

Yet another major debate over ICBM basing can be foreseen. A mobile small missile may be vulnerable to barrage attack, and its communication links and accuracy could be affected adversely by movement. Casual talk of "mixed basing" for the small missile, far from solving the difficulties, may serve to compound them. The point here is not that survivable basing modes cannot be found for the small missile, but that on the basis of the MX experience it is difficult to be optimistic. Any critic of the MX who claims to have found in the small missile *the* solution to crisis stability should be compelled to think through the prospective basing scheme for his preferred system.

No Less Expensive

Third, while there are no inexpensive ways in which the ICBM inventory can be modernized, it is very likely indeed that a small missile deployed in a highly survivable manner would be an extraordinarily expensive way to provide ready ICBM warheads. Housing only one warhead on a missile means the purchase of one launcher per warhead, one guidance system per warhead, one armored truck per warhead – and so on. It is too early to offer dollar estimates, but it seems safe to say that a small missile worth purchasing on strategic grounds – one truly mobile or heavily defended by concrete and steel – will be almost inevitably in deep trouble on budgetary grounds.

Fourth, the arms-control dimension to the new stability thesis may not be as encouraging as proponents of the small missile suggest. It is probable that the USSR will decline any invitation to effect a START-licensed restructuring of its ICBM force. The Soviet Union is not known to share American fears of crisis instability, almost certainly judges its very substantial force of

heavily MIRVed SS-18s and SS-19s as a very efficient means of packaging an opening counterforce punch, and already has a mobile, small single-warhead ICBM, in the form of the SS-20 IRBM (if two warheads are offloaded) and the new PL-5.

Moreover, the verification problems associated with a small, genuinely mobile ICBM may not lend themselves to easy solution in the predictable absence of "on-site" counting procedures.

Notwithstanding the negative points registered above, it is necessary to agree with the Commission in noting the synergism between the MX and the small single-warhead ICBM. The threat posed by the MX to many Soviet ICBMs in silos may encourage Soviet interest in deploying a more survivable and less-threatening ICBM force. It is arguable, at least, that unless the USSR can be persuaded by the MX (and, eventually the mid- to late- 1990s, to a lesser degree by the Trident D-5) threat to draw down the quantity of its ICBM payload, it is virtually impossible for the US to deploy a genuinely survivable, small, single-warhead ICBM at a bearable cost.

Panaceas and Sound Programs

It is evident that the elements for a national consensus on strategic force modernization and strategic arms control have been assembled. It is no less evident that, as the Commission maintained very strongly, no single element in the package can stand on its own. Deployment of the MX ICBM must be the first priority in the ICBM/arms-control story, because it is the basis for everything else.

In the absence of a visibly healthy MX deployment program, it is inconceivable that the Soviet Union will be interested in drawing down the payload of its ICBM force, at least during the 1980s. Also, a US ICBM force comprising, eventually, several hundred small, single-warhead missiles and perhaps a very modest-size force of very old Minuteman IIIs would lack the throw-weight needed for payload flexibility in the face of what certainly would continue to be very stressful threats.

Furthermore, one cannot be certain that a small ICBM will be politically feasible, once the costs involved come to be appreciated. It follows that the US cannot prudently forgo MX deployment, for in that unhappy event there may be no modern ICBMs in the arsenal of the 1990s.

The small ICBM could be a valuable element in a timely shift toward a more stable strategic force posture. Properly, that is to say survivably, deployed, it should lend useful assistance for deterrence to an MX force housed in silos. The overall value of a counter-MX strike would be reduced to an important degree were Soviet targeteers to confront, simultaneously, the difficulty of finding, tracking, and striking a truly mobile force of small, but hard-target capable, single-warhead ICBMs.

The MX alone or the small ICBM alone is not panaceas for strategic problems. Neither are the several radical START ideas currently fashionable. Politicians and journalists are apt to forget that the basis for arms control negotiations is the reality or perceived reality of the strategic balance.

If the US does not correct the strategic balance, it will find no solace through the design of ingenious START proposal. Indeed, heretical though it may be, the fine print of our START approach matters relatively little. What will be negotiable will depend on the strategic stability that the US builds unilaterally into its force posture and its strategic C³I.

The idea a strategic forces “bulldown” has attracted attention, support, and even highly conditional Administration backing. The basic “bulldown” scheme proposed by Sens. Sam Nunn of Georgia and William S. Cohen of Maine of retiring two old warheads for every new warhead added is a nonstarter (and nonstarter). Elementary arithmetic demonstrates that this basic “bulldown” idea would compel the US to retire the Minuteman force in exchange for deployment of 100 MX missiles – a move that would be extremely detrimental to strategic stability. In addition, little imagination is required to picture the devastation that deployment of 100 B-1Bs (with 2,000 to 3,000 new weapons on board) would have on the rest of the triad. Where would the 4,000 to 6,000 older weapons to be retired come from?

As the President wrote in a letter to the Senate authors of the basic “bulldown” scheme, the idea would have to be applied “appropriately” and “flexibly.” In practice this would entail variable ratios (three-for-one, two-for-one, or even one-for-one); it may not be permitted to apply at all to certain categories of weapons deemed inherently stabilizing; it might need a floor on inventory numbers in some categories; it would need to be negotiated and fully verifiable. In short, once one looks at the real implications, the idea – as a simple panacea – fades very rapidly. At the very least, it is evident that a “bulldown” would be very difficult to negotiate.

The President’s Commission on Strategic Forces is correct in its recommendation that the US should revise its START proposal away from a constraining limit on ballistic missile launchers. Such a limit (the US has proposed 850) encourages the packaging of maximum firepower on each missile.

Instead of raising the launcher limit, or shifting exclusively to a warhead count, the time is right for the Administration to consider very seriously employing throw-weight as the major unit of account and leaving each side at liberty to design its mix of forces according to its own strategic preference. To repeat a familiar refrain, ingenuity in proposal design is strictly of secondary significance for the prospect for START success as compared with the primary influence of *real* weapon programs. – End

About the Author

Colin S. Gray is President of the National Institute for Public Policy in Fairfax, VA. He earned his doctorate from Oxford in 1970 and, prior to the founding of the National Institute in 1981; he was an Assistant Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, and Director of National Security Studies at Hudson Institute, Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y. He serves as a member of the General Advisory Committee of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. His most recent book is American Military Space Policy: Information Systems, Weapon Systems, and Arms Control (Cambridge, Mass, Abt. Books, 1983)