

Reagan's Zero Option

The Soviet Union in the 1970s deployed hundreds of SS-4, SS-5, and SS-20 intermediate-range nuclear missiles against targets in Western Europe. In 1979, NATO countered with a plan to base in Europe 572 of its own intermediate-range missiles. Inflamed anti-nuclear forces began years of protests. President Ronald Reagan, who inherited NATO's plan, was determined to press on, but found a better way. He offered to cancel the US deployments if Moscow would withdraw all SS-20s—the "Zero Option." The arms control clerisy considered the idea "unrealistic," designed to score propaganda points. They were wrong. After the US began to deploy intermediate-range nuclear forces weapons in late 1983, the Soviets folded. The Zero Option became the core of the 1987 INF Treaty. In a few years, all such weapons were gone. Their elimination constituted a key step toward liquidation of the Cold War.

I would like to discuss ... the growing threat to Western Europe which is posed by the continuing deployment of certain Soviet intermediate-range nuclear missiles. The Soviet Union has three different [types of] such missile systems: the SS-20, the SS-4, and the SS-5, all with the range capable of reaching virtually all of Western Europe. There are other Soviet weapon systems which also represent a major threat.

Now, the only answer to these systems is a comparable threat to Soviet threats, to Soviet targets; in other words, a deterrent preventing the use of these Soviet weapons by the counterthreat of a like response against their own territory. At present, however, there is no equivalent deterrent to these Soviet intermediate missiles. And the Soviets continue to add one new SS-20 a week.

To counter this, the allies agreed in 1979, as part of a two-track decision, to deploy as a deterrent land-based cruise missiles and Pershing II missiles capable of reaching targets in the Soviet Union. These missiles are to be deployed in several countries of Western Europe. This relatively limited force in no way serves as a substitute for the much larger strategic umbrella spread over our NATO allies. Rather, it provides a vital link between conventional shorter-range nuclear forces in Europe and intercontinental forces in the United States.

Deployment of these systems will demonstrate to the Soviet Union that this link cannot be broken. Deterring war depends on the perceived ability of our forces to perform effectively. The more effective our forces are, the less likely it is that we'll have to use them. So, we and our allies are proceeding to modernize NATO's nuclear forces of intermediate range to meet increased Soviet deployments of nuclear systems threatening Western Europe.

Let me turn now to our hopes for arms control negotiations. There's a tendency to make this entire subject overly complex. I want to be clear and concise. ... I've just sent another message to the Soviet leadership. It's a simple, straightforward yet historic, message. ...

The first and most important point concerns the Geneva negotiations. As part of the 1979 two-track decision, NATO made a commitment to seek arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union on intermediate-range nuclear forces. The United States has been preparing for these negotiations through close consultation with our NATO partners.

"Arms Reduction and Nuclear Weapons"

President Ronald Reagan
Address to the National Press Club
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Nov. 18, 1981

Find the full text on the
Air Force Magazine's website
www.airforce-magazine.com
"Keeper File"

We're now ready to set forth our proposal. I have informed President Brezhnev that, when our delegation travels to the negotiations on intermediate-range, land-based nuclear missiles in Geneva on the 30th of this month, my representatives will present the following proposal: The United States is prepared to cancel its deployment of Pershing II and ground-launch cruise missiles if the Soviets will dismantle their SS-20, SS-4, and SS-5 missiles. This would be an historic step. With Soviet agreement, we could together substantially reduce the dread threat of nuclear war which hangs over the people of Europe. This, like the first footstep on the Moon, would be a giant step for mankind.

Now, we intend to negotiate in good faith and go to Geneva willing to listen to and consider the proposals of our Soviet counterparts, but let me call to your attention the background against which our proposal is made.

During the past six years, while the United States deployed no new intermediate-range missiles and withdrew 1,000 nuclear warheads from Europe, the Soviet Union deployed 750 warheads on mobile, accurate ballistic missiles. They now have 1,100 warheads on the SS-20s, SS-4s, and -5s. And the United States has no comparable missiles. Indeed, the United States dismantled the last such missile in Europe over 15 years ago.

As we look to the future of the negotiations, it's also important to address certain Soviet claims, which left unrefuted, could become critical barriers to real progress in arms control.

The Soviets assert that a balance of intermediate-range nuclear forces already exists. That assertion is wrong. By any objective measure, ... the Soviet Union has developed an increasingly overwhelming advantage. They now enjoy a superiority on the order of six to one. ...

My Administration, our country, and I are committed to achieving arms reductions agreements. ... Today I have outlined the kinds of bold, equitable proposals which the world expects of us. But we cannot reduce arms unilaterally. Success can only come if the Soviet Union will share our commitment, if it will demonstrate that its often-repeated professions of concern for peace will be matched by positive action. ■