

The Endangered Balance

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If there has been some improvement in American-Soviet relations under former Premier Khrushchev and his successors, a large share of the credit probably must go to the "balance of terror" brought about by each country's possession of hydrogen bombs and the means for their assured delivery on target.

Aside from these technical capabilities, the restraining effect of the deterrent weapons systems needs only the willingness of each nation to make good on the implicit threat of instant, massive destruction; and in the Cuban crisis President Kennedy removed any lingering doubts the Russians may have had on that point. For our part, the United States has always acted on the assumption that the Kremlin would "press the button" if its vital interests seemed to require it.

But now there is the possibility that new technological advances may upset this serviceable, if worrisome, balance and produce a costly and dangerous new armaments race. With the Vietnamese war currently blocking any further steps toward U. S.-Soviet accommodation, the chances of averting such developments are about as slim as they could be, yet neither side can afford to upset the existing balance without fully probing the likely consequences.

Almost from the time that intercontinental rockets, able to strike half a world

away within some 20 minutes, were developed, the search has been on—both here and in the Soviet Union—for a way to intercept them. There is some evidence that the Russians aren't bluffing when they claim that they have now developed a dependable anti-missile missile; the American program has come far enough to confirm that the feat is not impossible, even though it is incredibly difficult.

The cost of mounting such defenses would run into many billions, and once the decision to do it was taken, it would have to be done quickly to minimize the risk of a pre-emptive enemy blow. Doing this on top of the Viet Nam war, the space program and the already-launched domestic projects of the "Great Society" could strain the economy to the breaking point. The consequences for Russia of a similar effort would be even greater. And—worst of all—there would be no assurance whatever that the end result would be greater security for either nation. For to some, nuclear war might become "thinkable" again, and the pressures for peaceful accommodation would be lessened.

Yet if Russia is serious about mounting anti-missile missiles that really work, we would have to do the same. The preferable course would be for both sides to defer such efforts and renew the drive to reduce tensions and nuclear risks. But neither can move in this direction alone.