

N.Y.T 1-31-89

FOREIGN AFFAIRS Flora Lewis

Worse Than We Knew

PARIS

No nuclear weapon has been exploded on an enemy since World War II. The world knew it had come close to a catastrophe in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. But it never knew how close until Soviet disclosure last weekend that 20 nuclear warheads, along with their missiles, had actually been deployed in Cuba.

At a remarkable meeting of Soviet, U.S. and Cuban officials in Moscow to exchange hindsight on the nearest we may have come to World War III, it was revealed that the warheads were ready to be mounted on their carriers in a matter of a few hours. If they had been used, it would have been against American cities, not military installations, leaving 20 American Hiroshimas.

Nikita Khrushchev's son Sergei, then a rocket engineer, said that Soviet forces in Cuba had no orders from Moscow, where his father was in charge, to use the missiles, "even in the event of an American invasion or air strike." But, of course, orders could have been given at any moment.

The crisis was resolved after President Kennedy ordered a naval blockade to intercept further Soviet ships instead of an air strike, which was considered. Mr. Khrushchev ordered a Soviet ship to go home. The U.S. promised not to invade Cuba and, secretly, to withdraw its missiles from Turkey in return for withdrawal of the Soviet missiles.

But the Moscow meeting showed there were many miscalculations, misunderstandings and intelligence failures before the accord was reached. The Soviets had 40,000 troops in Cuba, not 10,000 as the U.S. thought, and only some 20 intercontinental missiles aimed at the U.S. from Soviet soil, not 75 as the U.S. estimated.

Now there are 50,000 nuclear warheads deployed around the world. The Soviet-U.S. treaty removing medium-range missiles from Europe reduced the arsenals some 4 percent. East-West tension has eased amazingly in the last couple of years. That Moscow session sharing old secrets is an example. But it cannot be said that the dan-

ger of catastrophe has disappeared.

There is better monitoring now, much better communications between adversaries, and much more atomic munitions. There is still a long way to go before the capacity to blow up the world is brought to match the improved political climate.

President Bush said he wanted an

The threat of nuclear war hasn't eased much since the Cuban crisis.

overall strategic review before resuming Start negotiations on 50 percent cuts in long-range missiles, begun in the Reagan Administration. That is sensible if it doesn't lead to a stall. As many have pointed out, the need is to improve confidence in stable deterrence. Just cutting numbers of weapons won't necessarily achieve that.

Talks about the Cuba crisis showed again how different the perception of threat can be from each side. Even if the hardware information is correct, intentions and motives can be drastically misconstrued. That is the argument for hardware constraints most likely to deprive either side of advantage by surprise attack, and therefore to increase assurance that neither would try.

Brent Scowcroft, the new national security adviser, has come out for a shift to single-warhead missiles instead of more heavy giants, in effect "less bang for a buck," to invert John Foster Dulles's phrase. When both sides have about equal numbers of weapons as targets, the risk of attacking is greater than any gain that might be expected.

But that means building new missiles, when the defense budget needs to be capped, and it will take time. Meanwhile, the political momentum for enhanced security through arms control must not be lost. The new climate is already bringing impressive benefits in other areas, especially in winding down regional wars.

There are interim ways to meet the needs of maintaining balance while both the U.S. and Moscow reconsider their aberrant force structures. Some require agreements, and some national decisions. The main remaining obstacles in the Start talks are Mr. Reagan's vision of space-based missile defenses and sea-launched cruise missiles, or SLCM's.

There should be room for a trade-off on these issues, as suggested last year by Sidney Drell, a Stanford physicist, and Thomas H. Johnson, di-

rector of the West Point Science Research Laboratory. The U.S. could agree to abide by the Antiballistic Missile Treaty for a decade, and the Soviets could agree to a limited number of slow-moving SLCM's, which the U.S. says can't be verified.

The lessons of the Cuba crisis review can help guide policy makers to foresee the pitfalls that lead to confrontation, and should spur the Bush Administration. They are a reminder that the task has only begun. □

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