

Tiger file

We Cut, You Cut

By David Linebaugh

WASHINGTON—In the spring of 1964, there was a token-sized United States troop withdrawal from Europe, a little-noticed and seemingly isolated event.

But this withdrawal was followed that summer by a withdrawal of Soviet troops. And these withdrawals took place after a series of United States-Soviet Union talks in 1963 about "mutual example" reduction in forces in Europe.

These talks and withdrawals may have been a cause-and-effect sequence or they may have been simply happy coincidence. The recently declassified Arms Control and Disarmament Agency summary of this tentative step toward military détente in Europe (released to me under a Freedom of Information Act request) leaves that question unanswered.

But the negotiators in the neglected and almost-forgotten 19-nation negotiation still under way in Vienna on reductions in forces in Central Europe might take note. The Vienna talks have been deadlocked since their start in 1973. Reductions by mutual example might be a way out and stop any further Soviet conventional buildup in Europe.

In the summer of 1963, the Russians publicly proposed force reductions in Europe, and then raised the matter privately with the United States. The question was discussed at meetings on Aug. 26, Aug. 28, Sept. 28 and Oct. 10. President John F. Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko and Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin were involved.

The Russians were thinking in terms of a formal agreement, the kind of agreement we are now trying to negotiate in Vienna. The United States was not interested in a formal agreement. The President's approach, and Secretary Rusk's, was highly pragmatic. They were interested in concrete measures of restraint—not in a long-drawn-out and complicated negotiation.

At the Aug. 26 meeting with the Russians, President Kennedy said that pressures from such considerations as our balance of payments were in the direction of troop cuts in Europe and that he assumed the same was true of the Russians. He indicated that a de facto freeze on force levels might be better than attempts to formalize a freeze, which would involve complications like the problem of inspection. Again on Aug. 28, Mr. Kennedy told Mr. Dobrynin that formalizing an agreement on the subject might produce more complexities than progress.

On Sept. 28, Mr. Rusk called Mr. Gromyko's attention to reports that

the United States was reducing its troops here and there. There were also intimations that the Soviet military budget might be smaller in the next year. Mr. Rusk suggested that the two sides might proceed on a de facto basis, without the necessity of working out the fine print of an agreement and being swamped in technicalities and complexities. Mr. Rusk said military expenditures could be limited through reciprocal action—each side would draw its own conclusions from the action of the other.

On Oct. 10, Mr. Kennedy told Mr. Gromyko that the United States had kept its troop level in Europe more or less constant—but that it expected to have fewer troops in Europe the following year. He suggested that the Soviet Union could also state its intentions on this subject.

While these discussions did not result in any explicit understanding, Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev said in a press interview at the end of the year that a "policy of mutual example" could be followed for force reductions, as well as for military budget cuts. Furthermore, the Russians advocated mutual-example force reductions in the 18-nation disarmament conference in Geneva at the session that began in January 1964.

In April, the United States announced a small European troop reduction—about 8,000 soldiers who had been sent to Germany as reinforcements during the Berlin crisis of 1961. Then during the summer the Russians withdrew a number of troops from East Germany; United States intelligence estimated that as many as 14,000 were withdrawn. No public announcement was made of the Soviet withdrawal. But the two superpowers had slightly diminished the military confrontation in Europe.

The State Department was prepared at the time to deny that these withdrawals were a "mutual example" measure. The United States apparently did not want to establish a pattern that might have created pressure for further reductions.

Toward the end of 1964, Mr. Gromyko again brought up the question of mutual-example reductions with Mr. Rusk. The Secretary of State referred to the United States reductions and noted that the Soviet Union had apparently also reduced its forces in Europe. Mr. Rusk indicated that the prospect for further United States action was not promising.

The matter ended there. We were then becoming more and more deeply involved in Vietnam, which soon overshadowed everything else.

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