

Soviet Missile Test May Chart a New Course for the

By BERNARD GWETZMAN

The announcement by Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger yesterday that the Soviet Union had finally flight-tested an independently targeted multiple warhead came as no surprise, since Pentagon leaders had been saying for more than a year that it was only a question of time before the Russians caught up with the Americans in multiple-warhead technology.

News
Analysis

But the unanswered question—perhaps as much a mystery to the Kremlin as to the White House—is whether the Russians intend to use the development simply to catch up with the Americans or to surpass them in both numbers of warheads and their destructive power.

This would be conceivable if the Russians began to put these

warheads on their entire arsenal of land-based and submarine-launched missiles.

In a sense, the Soviet flight test has put the newly-developed, improved state of relations between Washington and Moscow to its first real test.

The two nations will have to decide in coming years whether to carry out their obligations, in various accords, not to seek nuclear superiority over the other or to let the Russian missile advances lead to another round in the arms race.

On June 21, President Nixon and Leonid I. Brezhnev, in the summit atmosphere of their second meeting, signed a seven-point document on the "basic principles" governing further negotiations on achieving a permanent treaty that would impose limits on each side's offensive nuclear weapons.

It was signed in the knowledge that the United States had

a technological lead over the Russians in multiple-warhead missiles, but that the Soviet Union had a numerical edge in numbers of missile launchers.

The two leaders agreed to accelerate negotiations so that an offensive-weapons treaty could be signed by the end of next year. In crucial language, they also agreed to be "guided by the recognition of each other's equal security interests and by the recognition that efforts to obtain unilateral advantage, directly or indirectly, would be inconsistent with the strengthening of peaceful relations between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

In other words, both sides agreed to take steps that would lead to mutual trust rather than mutual suspicion, the cause for most of the previous arms races between the two nuclear powers.

Parity in Sight

It was always clear from talking with Soviet officials that they regarded the MIRV as an important weapons system. A senior Soviet official once said that "we made the mistake of going for an ABM [anti-ballistic missile] while you went for MIRV."

"I wish it was the other way around," he added.

Now that the Russians seem on their way to developing and deploying multiple-warhead missiles, they will have achieved their objective of achieving technological parity with the United States. Will they agree to a formula at the talks on limitation of strategic arms, due to resume this fall in Geneva, which would insure that a rough equality could be achieved, and sufficiently verified, so that neither Moscow nor Washington felt at a disadvantage?

Visits Are Ruled Out

There are many possible ways of achieving this, but the agreement reached in June rules out visits by officials of one country to the missile sites of the other to inspect what is going on. Rather, verification must be by "national technical means," a highly complex field involving "spy-in-the-sky" photo reconnaissance satellites and various radar systems.

Up to now, verification has been relatively easy because the first arms-control accord, signed in Moscow in May, 1972, put limits only on the number of launch vehicles. These launch vehicles—or rockets, to aymen—can be detected by

reconnaissance satellites either at their land-based sites or by spotting submarines.

But the MIRV's, placed on top of the launch vehicles, are virtually impossible to detect.

It is not possible to tell, by photography, for instance, whether a warhead has one, three or a dozen individual missiles.

It is possible to ascertain this by checking the flight-testing of the other side what kind of MIRVs it can launch. In other words, if the Russians only flight test a six-head missile, this means that it is unlikely they will be able to put a 12-head cap on top of their launchers.

An Accepted Disadvantage

Under the five-year interim accord on offensive weapons, the United States accepted a disadvantage in total numbers of launchers—1,710 to 2,358—because with the MIRV, the United States had a two-to-one edge in the number of warheads.

By simple arithmetic, the

Arms Talks

Russians could surpass the United States both in numbers of warheads and in their total destructiveness by the end of the decade, if they chose.

They would have more destructive power — "throw weight," in the jargon—because they have gone in for mammoth land-based missiles rather than the smaller ones deployed by the United States.

In the past, officials such as Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's national security adviser, have predicted that the strategic arms negotiators would have a very difficult time reaching an accord on offensive weapons because of the problems in verifying limits on multiple-warhead missiles.

But Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Nixon have both said also that the United States and the Soviet Union were entering a new historic relationship. The relationship will be severely tested in coming months and years by MIRV.

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