

Soviet Disarmament Breakthrough

On February 28th, CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev proposed that all medium-range nuclear missiles be phased out of Europe within five years. The Soviet Union and the US would scrap all but 100 warheads each, to be redeployed on their own territory (in the case of the Soviet Union, in the Asian republics). Comrade Gorbachev outlined other disarmament steps the Soviet Union was interested in exploring: reduction of long-range missiles, conditional on non-deployment of weapons in space; substantial cuts in conventional forces in Europe; reduction of short-range missiles; and the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles that were stationed in the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia after NATO's 1979 decision to deploy US cruise and Pershing-II missiles in Britain, West Germany, Italy and Belgium.

Comrade Gorbachev's offer was promptly welcomed by Washington and a number of West European capitals. The propaganda usually set in motion automatically whenever the Soviets table a peace proposal just didn't work this time. The imperialist forces had been criticizing the Soviets for conditioning any missiles accord on non-development, testing and deployment of weapons in space. Boldly, comrade Gorbachev broke this linkage, depriving the imperialist forces of all their arguments. In broad outline, his proposal corresponds to the 'zero option' which the US promoted with European support, precisely because they thought the Soviets would never accept it. Blinded by their own anti-communism, the imperialists have grossly underestimated the seriousness of the Soviet's desire for peace. Gorbachev's proposal caught them off guard.

In view of the Reagan Administration's determined militarism, epitomized in the SDI program for weapons in space, the Soviet Union had two options. It could have lived with the stalemate that followed the Reykjavik Summit, content that the world had seen that it was Reagan who had blocked an accord by insisting on the SDI. Alternately, the Soviet Union could take a new approach to regain the momentum in the disarmament talks, even if this meant major compromises.



The Soviet leadership opted for the latter, based on their sincere desire for peace and their determination to channel their resources towards the economic and social renewal that is sweeping the home of the October Revolution.

Thus, the Soviet missiles initiative has a double significance. On the political level, it emphasizes the vital interrelation between a socialist country's domestic and foreign policy, and that this convergence is in the interests of global peace and human progress, while also consolidating socialism. On the practical level, Gorbachev's initiative is being viewed by many as opening the way for «the biggest breakthrough in arms control since the heyday of detente in the early 1970s» (*The Guardian*, March 2nd). Bruce Kent of the CND in Britain noted, «Gorbachev has lifted the level of debate from warheads to people, and to the needs of our fragile planet. Someone in the name of humanity, and with the morale stature needed, ought to be able to reply» (*The Guardian*, March 9th). The atmosphere at the Geneva disarmament talks was revitalized as the Soviets officially tabled their proposal, bringing within reach an INF treaty (Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces, i.e., medium-range missiles).

FOLLOW—THROUGH

Despite the substantial Soviet compromises offered, the imperialist powers recovered from their surprise and began rumbling their reservations, trying to deprive Gorbachev of the initiative. The US stressed the obstacles to an INF treaty, especially verification and the problem of short-range missiles (which the Reagan Administration insists on increasing prior to the freeze the Soviets have previously suggested). The Reagan Administration also insisted that the remaining 100 Soviet medium-range missiles be stationed at one base in Siberia, while the US would put theirs in Alaska, right across the Bering Straits from Soviet territory! Britain's Thatcher and West Germany's

Kohl pointed to the 'threat' of Soviet superiority in conventional forces (a superiority which is incidentally disputed by the International Institute of Strategic Studies' 1986 report). The French government was adamant that negotiations should not lead to the «denuclearization of Europe», even though the Soviet proposal leaves aside the British and French nuclear arsenals.

While expressing disappointment at the mixed response, Soviet officials continued to make their initiative more concrete, steadily undermining all excuses. They agreed to on-the-spot verification of missile removal. They pledged to reposition their remaining 100 medium-range missiles out of range of European as well as US territory. They agreed to the INF treaty's containing a provision on dealing with the issue of short-range missiles. They embarked on discussions of a troop pull-back from Europe, with the Warsaw Pact meeting for this purpose on March 24th. An official statement confirmed that the missiles moved into GDR and Czechoslovakia would be removed upon the signing of an INF treaty.

As a result of concerted Soviet struggle for peace, against all odds, a series of events show that a breakthrough may indeed be at hand. The Geneva INF talks were extended. The US announced that Secretary of State Schultz would visit Moscow, accompanied by senior arms control advisors, to discuss all issues. There is, of course, still a chance that the Reagan Administration will try to sabotage disarmament by harping on its distorted perception of «regional conflicts» and «human rights» - two issues it wants to discuss in Moscow, in addition to disarmament and bilateral relations. However, still reeling under the impact of the Iran/contragate scandal, the Reagan Administration may realize that it needs a positive foreign policy result in arms control, to try and recover its sliding popularity.

In any case, the majority of the world is eagerly watching the arms control talks in Geneva. This round, due to the new Soviet initiative, could well lead to the removal of medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe - a cause for which unprecedented numbers of people have demonstrated and struggled over the past few years.