LEANING ON SCOWCROFT

The Politics of Saving the MX

BY STEVEN E. MILLER

GENERAL BRENT SCOWCROFT

THE LATEST major twist in the 10-year saga of the MX missile took place last April 11 when the President's Commission on Strategic Forces—headed by General Brent Scowcroft (USAF Ret.)—issued its report. The document, whose "approach" President Reagan has assured Congress he shares, represents the most recent attempt to find a formula for selling the MX to the public and on Capitol Hill. In this it may well succeed, for it is a shrewdly crafted political package designed to appeal to several different constituencies simultaneously. But as a framework for thinking about the near-term future of U.S. strategic forces, the Scowcroft findings are far from compelling. They seem to be a recipe for acquiring the MX, nothing more.

The background to the Commission's formation is crucial to understanding its recommendations. Only six months ago, on November 22, 1982, President Reagan announced in a televised speech that he wanted to produce the MX and to deploy it in a new way. The missiles were to be housed in closely based silos—underground concrete shelters located so near to one another that, in the event of a Soviet attack, the effects from the explosions of the first incoming warheads would destroy those following. This "fratricide," the theory went, would ensure the survival of a significant percentage of the MX "densepack."

The President's address was long and impassioned, outlining what he perceived as the USSR's military advantages to demonstrate the urgent necessity for modernizing America's nuclear systems. Nonetheless, the initiative quickly backfired. Upon scrutiny, it was evident that, owing to certain technical deficiencies, closely spaced basing would provide a relatively ineffective safeguard for the MX. The plan became a cartoonists' delight, subject to widespread ridicule under the label "dunce pack." The President's proposal thus appeared to have been hasty and ill-considered, and was widely attributed to his need to offer some alternative after having repudiated the Carter Administration's mobile multiple protective shelter scheme. (Carter's idea, incidentally, though politically and financially costly, could possibly have assured the MX some reasonable degree of survivability.)

Reflecting the general mood, the House of Representatives last December 7 voted 245-176 against any appropriation for MX production. Allocations for missile-related engineering and flight testing were passed, but on the condition that they be withheld until the Administration had found a more credible basing mode. The Commission was Reagan's response to this impasse. Besides General Scowcroft, a former National Security Adviser, the distin-

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guished bipartisan group included former Secretaries of Defense Harold Brown, Melvin R. Laird, Donald H. Rumsfeld, and James R. Schlesinger, plus former Secretaries of State Alexander M. Haig and Henry A. Kissinger. Its mandate was, in Scowcroft's words, "to examine the future of our ICBM force and to recommend basing alternatives." In the political context of the moment, this really meant finding a rationale and a basing mechanism for the MX that would be acceptable to a majority in Congress.

This was no easy assignment. The MX had been extensively studied in the decade since it came into the limelight. Virtually every conceivable potential deployment pattern had already been analyzed in detail. The Defense Department alone had issued thousands of pages of reports on the weapon, and in 1980 the Office of Technology Assessment had done a lengthy study of basing modes. Other official commissions had investigated the MX dilemma as well, notably the two convened under the chairmanship of physicist Charles Townes as part of President Carter's effort to muster a consensus behind his own MX policy. It was hard to imagine how the Scowcroft Commission could come up with something new in a few months.

The tack taken this time, though, was different. Rather than seeking a technical solution to the problem of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) vulnerability—as all the previous panels, studies and reports had done—the Scowcroft Commission primarily aimed at facilitating a political compromise on the MX, while offering some guidelines for the future development of U.S. strategic forces.

The Commission had to be cognizant, above all, of the Reagan Administration's unwavering commitment to the controversial weapon. A recommendation against deployment might embarrass the White House and place one more obstacle in its path, but there was no chance of altering the Chief Executive's course. In addition, the President's determination had to be reconciled with Congress' skepticism to some extent, since Reagan's goal could not be achieved unless at least 30 Representatives were persuaded to change their votes on funding. Further, the Commission had to bear in mind the growing support, both on Capitol Hill and in the country as a whole, for meaningful arms control—symbolized at present by the concept of a nuclear freeze.

Scowcroft and his colleagues responded to these conflicting considerations with considerable deftness. After three months of deliberations, they issued a report that has at its heart three steps they insist are inseparable:

1. One hundred MX missiles should be built and installed in existing Minuteman III silos.

2. Work should begin on the development of a small, single warhead missile for possible deployment in the 1990s.

3. The United States should vigorously pursue arms control accords that focus on constraining warheads as opposed to launchers, and that are designed to encourage the shift toward single warhead weapons.

The political virtue of this prescription is obvious. To backers of the MX, it gives the MX; to the increasingly numerous advocates of a "Midgetman" missile, it holds out the prospect that one will soon be introduced; to supporters of arms control, it dangles the possibility of a strategic future where nuclear limitation will play a central role. The calculation is that each camp will tolerate the elements it doesn't like in order to gain what it wants. And in thus meeting an exceedingly difficult challenge the Commission has served President Reagan well.

But leaving politics aside, we are faced with the strategic substance of the Scowcroft report. Does it add up to a program that those who previously doubted the value of the MX ought to find persuasive? Upon close examination, there are strong reasons for answering in the negative.

To begin with, the attention accorded the report's more sweeping long-term suggestions for small missiles and rigorous arms control efforts has tended to obscure the fact that its implications for *this* decade stray little, if at all, from the status quo. The main components of Reagan's strategic policy are endorsed, including of course the immediate deployment of the MX. Critics are asked to go along now in exchange for the prospect of a small missile 10 years hence and the promise of stringent pursuit of arms control at some unspecified point in the future.

Yet there is a distinct possibility that neither will ever come to pass. The single warhead missile does not inspire much enthusiasm in the Pentagon. It also depends on substantial arms reductions. Under present conditions, it would be easily offset by Soviet ICBMs equipped with multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicle (MIRV) warheads. Arms control is in turn contingent on the positions of both the U.S. and the Soviet leadership. Even granting the Reagan Administration the best of intentions, it cannot guarantee that the Kremlin will accept the ambitious agreements envisioned by the Scowcroft report.

In concrete terms, therefore, all the Commission has said is that 100 MX should be placed in Minuteman silos. Moreover, it presents a fairly conventional case in support of this course. A grab bag of pro-MX arguments are gathered together, none of them new or more convincingly stated than they have been in the past. The Commission at one point suggests that ICBMs are a hedge against the emergence of vulnerabilities in the strategic submarine force. It goes on to undermine itself, however, by concluding that submarines will continue to have a high degree of survivability for a long time, and that in any case the current ICBM arsenal can provide the hedge just as well without the MX. The Commission also remarks that the existence of the ICBM force serves to complicate possible Soviet plans of attack, but again this is not an argument for the MX in particular.

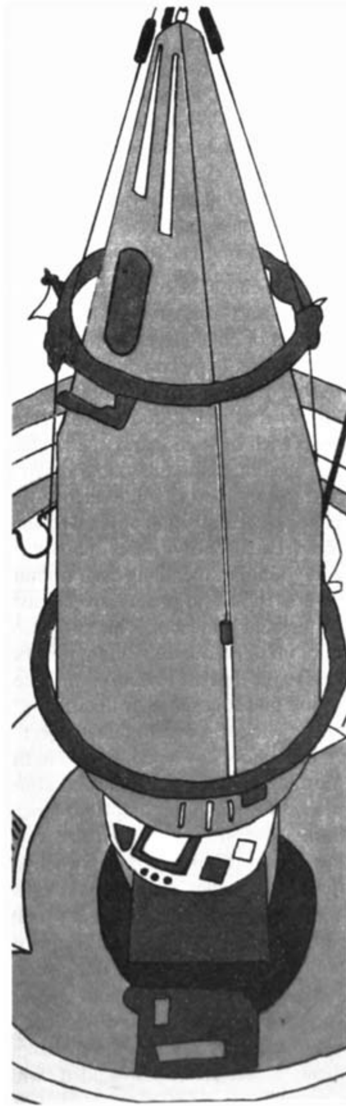
Then there is the bargaining chip theory, holding that the MX is necessary to give the Soviets the incentive to negotiate seriously on strategic arms. This is critical to the whole Scowcroft

package, for it brings the MX portion into harmony with the other two. It is what enables the Commissioners to devote much of their report to demonstrating the desirability of single warhead missiles, while nonetheless pushing for the 10-warhead MX. Where some might sense a contradiction, they assert that the elimination of multiple warhead missiles must be negotiated before a single warhead environment can be created, and that the USSR will never give up its large MIRVed ICBMs unless the United States has similar weapons of its own to trade away—consequently, the MX is an unavoidable step on the road toward a small missile.

The general line of reasoning here is plausible and impossible to disprove. We may, on the other hand, contest the presumption that out of the entire panoply of U.S. nuclear weapons deployed or under development, only the MX will suffice to press the Soviet Union toward a meaningful arms treaty. SALT I and SALT II indicate, too, that it has in the past been possible to reach agreement in spite of significant asymmetries in the two sides' strategic strengths. If that is no longer true, it seems highly dubious that 100 MX could bring the Russians to the table anyway, considering that they would hardly balance more than 600 large, MIRVed Soviet ICBMs.

One of the several other arguments the Commission advances is that the MX deployment has become a test of national will, so canceling it now would send the wrong signal to Moscow. Yet this can be said to defend any weapon in the developmental stage. Certainly, the United States did not revise its estimate of the Soviet national will when the Kremlin decided against procuring the ineffective SS-16 missile. Particularly during the present period of strategic buildup, we ought not to convince ourselves that making defense decisions on their merits will adversely affect the image of American power.

More seriously, the Commission contends that the MX is needed to match the USSR's ability to quickly destroy hard targets. The belief that Soviet superiority in this area provides political advantages, and gives the Kremlin dangerous escalatory options that the U.S. cannot meet, has long been a central tenet of MX supporters. But the Soviet hard-target kill capability could be substantially neutralized if the U.S. would reduce the role of vulnerable fixed-site, land-based systems in its forces. Second, current U.S. systems—namely the modernized Minuteman III—already possess a capacity for hitting hardened Soviet targets, the MX would simply



give us more. Finally, the Trident II missile scheduled to be available in the late 1980s will perform basically the same function as the MX in this respect, while being survivably based on submarines.

THE LAST major point the Commission raises in the MX's favor echoes the President's earlier claim that the nation's ICBM force must be modernized. In response, it bears observing that the MX will replace only 100 of the 1,000 existing Minutemen, and the scrapped missiles will be the relatively new Minuteman IIIs, not the older Minuteman IIs. It is hard to understand how such modernization can indeed be imperative.

And what of the "window of vulnerability" that the MX was supposed to close? For five years the President has been harping on this. The Scowcroft panel dismissed the problem as overblown when looked at in the context of overall U.S. capabilities. Far from finding a survivable basing mode for the MX, it said there is no technological solution to the vulnerability of the MX or any other ICBM, and maintained that the insufficiency is less dangerous than we have recently been led to believe. In other words, if the MX is deployed, as the Commission advises, it will be nearly as vulnerable as the Minutemen. And if one accepts President Reagan's estimate of the vulnerability window, we will be putting a high-value target where it can easily be hit.

In sum, the Scowcroft Commission has not really changed the character of the MX debate. It offers an improbable bargain that gains the MX in the short-term against an uncertain payoff in the distant future. The key elements of its case for going ahead with the MX—the bargaining chip, and the need for prompt hard-target kill capability—remain controversial. The Commission did perform a valuable national service in putting the ICBM vulnerability issue into a reasonable perspective, and it evinced great political skill under trying conditions. Still, it hasn't given those who opposed the MX before any reason to be in favor of it now.