

THINKING ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS AFTER THE COUP

Recent radical reductions of nuclear weapons reveal just how tired and encrusted the arms control process had become.

BY DAVID COX

FOR A BRIEF MOMENT DURING THE SOVIET coup, arms control advocates might have seen the history of their cause flash before their eyes. Only a few weeks earlier, Presidents Bush and Gorbachev had finally agreed on a START Treaty which had taken a mere nine years to negotiate. The agreement was anti-climactic. Despite reducing the numbers of the largest and most destabilizing ICBMs and introducing intricate verification provisions, the 700-page draft treaty and protocols left the Soviet Union and the United States with the right to deploy over 8,000 strategic nuclear weapons apiece – only marginally fewer than the numbers deployed in the early 1980s when the START negotiations began.

THE ENNUI INDUCED BY THE START AGREEMENT changed to anxiety in mid-August when it appeared that the Yanayev conspirators might be successful in their coup against Gorbachev. Suddenly, the prospect that the START agreement might be jeopardized seemed to make it an essential element in strategic stability. This apparently contrary response is easily explained. The brief prospect of a return to a Brezhnev-style regime in the Soviet Union was a useful reminder that the arms control process, which in the case of strategic arms negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union, has been virtually continuous since 1969, has emphasized stability and predictability, not disarmament. Moreover, most of the nuclear arms control agreements since 1963 – the crisis hot line, the partial test ban treaty, the non-proliferation treaty, the SALT agreements and the ABM Treaty – were negotiated with an extremely conservative and profoundly undemocratic Soviet regime. In the wisdom of the trade, arms control is for adversaries, not for friends.

The Yanayev conspirators, therefore, might have been less willing than Gorbachev to allow intrusive inspection, but there is no reason to believe that they would have been hostile to the START agreement. Indeed, one of Yanayev's first announcements, obviously intended to reassure the United States, was that

his new government would abide by the arms control agreements previously negotiated.

What would have happened if Boris Yeltsin had emerged as the unchallenged leader of the Soviet Union? Conservative strategists in the Bush administration might well have pondered that situation with disquiet. Just after the coup, Yeltsin attacked a Soviet plan to step up nuclear weapons tests in the Arctic and called for a global ban on nuclear weapon tests. More so than Gorbachev, if Yeltsin had been in charge of the START negotiations he might have held out for very deep reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the two sides, and so embarrassed the Bush Administration with his determination to move beyond the modest objectives of the START negotiations.

Challenging the very limited, conservative objectives of START has not been fashionable in Washington. No less than in the Soviet Union, US strategic arms control negotiating positions are the product of lengthy inter-agency bargaining in a bureaucratic structure which does not adapt well to rapid changes. In arms control matters, therefore, strange though it may sound after the theatrics of the coup, the Yanayev team might have been a more familiar partner for the United States than a post-Gorbachev radical government dominated by the supporters of Boris Yeltsin.

IN THE OUTCOME, THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION was forced to respond neither to a radical nor a conservative central government in Moscow, but to the prospect that there may soon be none at all. Ironically, therefore, the Soviet coup set the scene for the transformation of arms control objectives and policies by raising the spectre of nuclear weapons on the loose. When this matter was first raised during the coup, it is no coincidence that the first soothing reassurances came from the Pentagon. Defense Secretary Cheney was quick to assert that all was well: "We did not believe that there was any increase in the risk of the use of nuclear weapons during the coup."

Perhaps not, but the risk of unauthorized control proved to be very great indeed. Not only did Yanayev dispossess Gorbachev of his briefcase containing the nuclear command

codes, but (reassuring or worrying?) in other accounts Defence Minister Yazov in his headlong rush to apologize to Gorbachev "lost" his nuclear briefcase, only to be saved by aides who, recognizing that the nuclear codes were about to fall into the hands of Yeltsin supporters, succeeded in erasing them and thus disabling the command procedures.

All's well that ends well?

BY THE END OF AUGUST, DESPITE MORE OFFICIAL reassurances, lower level Pentagon sources began to sound a different note: "The next thing you know" an unidentified official commented, "one of these nukes end up on the docks in Beirut." Evidently, President Bush and his National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, also began to think otherwise. On 27 September, Bush tried to seize the initiative with a carefully timed set of unilateral measures. These measures will have long-term consequences for nuclear arms control, but they were undoubtedly precipitated by the threat of nuclear instability in the Soviet Union. That threat, and the need for a show of US political leadership in a rapidly changing situation, was sufficient to persuade Bush to circumvent the hardening-of-the-arteries bureaucratic arms control process.

In announcing that US strategic bombers and older ICBMs would stand down from their alert posture, and inviting the Soviets to take similar actions, Bush hoped to remove some of the most trigger-happy nuclear weapons from the grasp of coup-mongers and other potential free-lance operators in the Soviet Union. He also indirectly revealed the tortoise-like schedule of the START agreement in declaring that, rather than wait for the treaty reduction plan to run its full seven years, the US would unilaterally accelerate the elimination of its older Minuteman II ICBMs.

INDIRECTLY ALSO, THE BUSH ANNOUNCEMENT took a hefty swipe at two other shibboleths of nuclear arms control: the invincibility of the US Navy, and the supposed vital link between "sub-strategic" nuclear weapons in Europe and