

foreign policy, including the INF Treaty, the with- ... from time to time — too long a tenure as the ... contributed this comment to The New ...

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START: A Dis-Arms Race Would Have Been Chancy

By Hans Binnendijk

LONDON — There appears to be an across-the-board slowdown in arms control progress. The slowdown is healthy for arms control and should not be misinterpreted by Europeans as unwarranted American foot-dragging.

In the case of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks, or START, there remain 1,200 bracketed items in 350 pages of draft treaty text, and fundamental differences over half a dozen major issues. The lack of dramatic progress at the last two foreign ministers' meetings ensures that the treaty will not be signed at the Moscow summit that starts May 29.

But completing the treaty by May could have proved unfortunate. It would have required forcing the United States to make so many concessions that the coalition for Senate ratification would have been lost. And it would have created the impression of negotiating under unfavorable time pressure, further eroding Senate support. Having yet another unratified strategic arms control agreement would be disruptive for trans-Atlantic relations, not to mention U.S.-Soviet relations.

The Kremlin is already maneuvering publicly to cast the blame for a treatyless summit meeting on the United States, while President Ron-

ald Reagan speculates about still another summit before the U.S. elections in November. Negotiations will become increasingly difficult as Election Day approaches, but the Soviet leadership is also under pressure to deliver a foreign policy success.

Even if a final START agreement is not reached by the Reagan administration, the framework for such a pact is now clear, and a new administration could negotiate a final, ratifiable agreement early in its term.

The need for a slowdown has support on both sides of the aisle in the Senate. A bipartisan delegation of Senate leaders who visited Europe in February urged the Reagan administration not to rush START. It is unlikely that a second major arms control agreement would be considered by the Senate this year.

There is also now tacit agreement within NATO not to rush into negotiations with Moscow on short-range nuclear missiles. The Russians seek to remove the remaining nuclear weapons from Europe; they engaged in a diplomatic offensive earlier this year to that end. Many analysts believe this eventually would increase the prospects for conventional war in Europe.

The INF Treaty has created a situ-

ation in which West Germans feel that nuclear risks are no longer shared equally throughout the alliance. The need to modernize the Lance missile has led to support in Bonn for early negotiations.

The NATO summit meeting last month formally ducked the issue, but an understanding developed that neither negotiations nor modernization would be pressed while a formula to restructure NATO's battlefield nuclear forces was being developed. Again, the delay is clearly worthwhile.

The NATO summit meeting did set down new markers for future "conventional stability talks" by singling out Soviet tanks and artillery for asymmetrical reductions. But progress is slow in the Vienna talks on a mandate for the conventional stability negotiations; the West wants progress on Soviet human rights as well as on arms control. In addition, the French are very cautious about approaching the talks and are raising questions about reduction zones and weapons capable of firing either conventional or nuclear warheads.

It is in fact critical that NATO move cautiously into these conventional-arms talks. Without firm

agreement within NATO about how to respond to the inevitable Soviet suggestion to curb dual-capable weapons and combat aircraft, the alliance would again be badly divided.

The Geneva talks on a chemical weapons ban are also now in low gear, after optimism generated last year when Soviet negotiators accepted many elements of the 1984 U.S. draft treaty. Verification details and Third World proliferation are the current stumbling blocks. While the West Germans press ahead, other NATO countries are taking a more cautious approach because of these problems.

A nonverifiable treaty would not be ratified in the U.S. Senate. The current delays, plus the use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war, may lead to a chemical weapons-free zone along the border between the two Germanys, where verification requirements would be less stringent.

The United States and its allies must set their own pace on arms control. General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev creates pressures with his almost monthly arms control initiatives. There are times when the West should take advantage of Mr. Gorbachev's apparent impatience, but it cannot be driven by it. Agreements need to be negotiated carefully and ratified in a way that does not create problems.

This is an important period of transition, and arms control is a leading element. If a new and more stable relationship is to be built between East and West, more than 40 years of distrust must be dealt with. That cannot be done quickly. And it cannot be done in the arms control field alone.

The writer is director of studies at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.