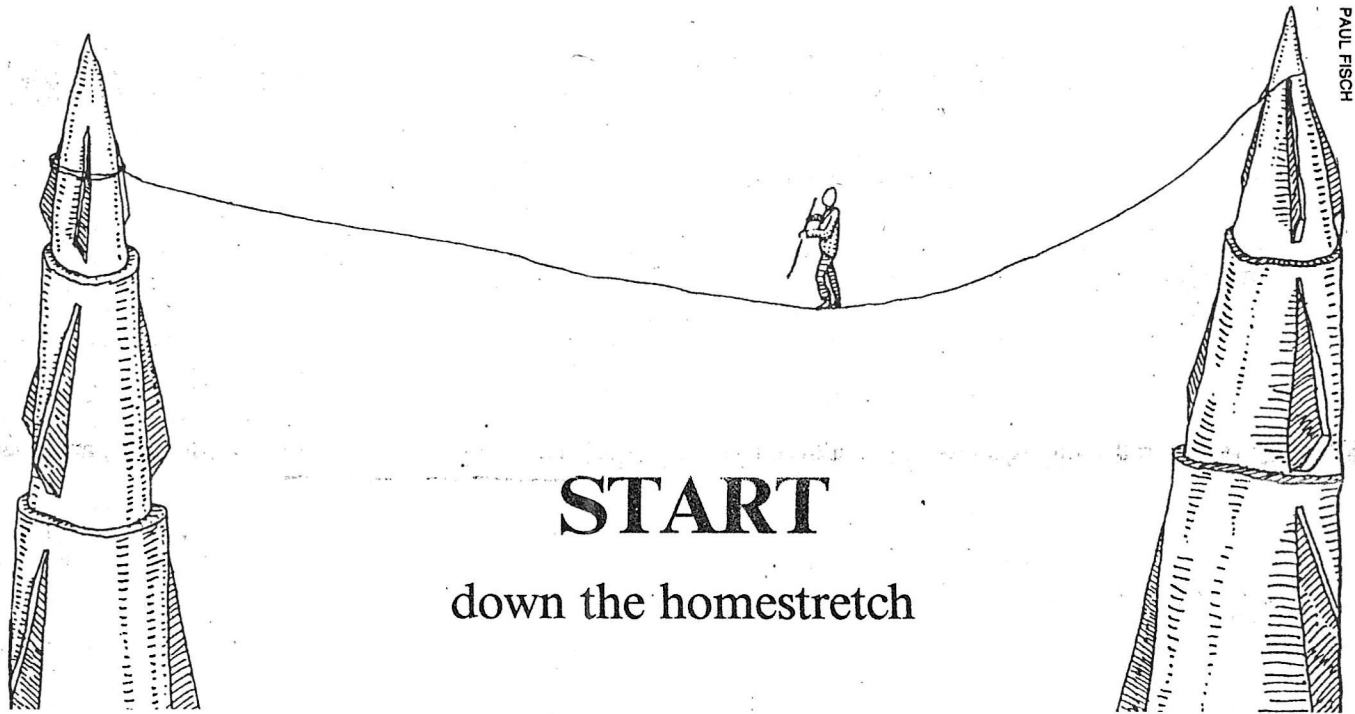


OPINION



PAUL FISCH

START
down the homestretch

LACK of progress on arms control during the recent visit to Washington by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze virtually ensures that a START treaty will not be signed during the Moscow summit in May. United States negotiators in Geneva, however, continue to believe that an agreement may be possible before the end of the year.

An accord would require major compromises at the policy level and uncommon ingenuity at the technical level. It would have to build on a prior summit agreement that each side will limit strategic nuclear delivery vehicles to 1,600, accountable nuclear warheads to 6,000, ballistic missile warheads to 4,000, and heavy missile warheads to 1,540.

At least six major issues remain unresolved. The most contentious political issue is the linkage between START and strategic defenses. The Soviets are unlikely to drop their linkage requirement completely simply because the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, or "star wars") is currently under congressional pressure.

The ambiguous SDI compromise worked out for the Washington summit is also no solution. It now has little support in the US, because the military seeks clarity for procurement decisions and because negotiators do not want to offer the Soviets loopholes.

Thus it remains likely that a space defense treaty will have to precede a START treaty. Negotiators believe they might reach a deal later this year by developing a middle ground between the broad and narrow interpretations of the Antiballistic Missile Treaty; several new ideas are in play.

The second fundamental problem deals with sea-launched cruise missiles, which the Washington summit statement noted will be dealt with outside the 6,000-warhead ceilings. The Soviet position would cap nuclear SLCMs at 400, deployed on strictly limited types of vessels, and place an additional limit of 600 on conventional SLCMs. The US plans to deploy about 750 nuclear SLCMs and might agree to a cap near that level. But the US will not agree to limits on SLCM carriers or on conventionally armed SLCMs.

SLCM verification also poses

nearly impossible problems, because SLCMs could be deployed anywhere on almost any ship. And effective SLCM verification, if achievable, would cause tremendous problems for the politically important policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons on board US ships.

A solution may be for each side to declare, outside the treaty framework, it will place a certain ceiling on SLCMs in its inventory. SLCMs might be limited informally, but verification requirements would be minimal.

A third difficult issue is the US desire for sublimits on Soviet ICBM warheads. The Soviets would probably not be unduly constrained by the 3,300 sublimit proposed by the US, because they have already

An accord would require major compromises at the policy level and ingenuity at the technical level.

agreed to other sublimits on overall ballistic missiles with practically the same effect. But their objective is equal treatment, so they have linked ICBM sublimits to strict limits on submarine-launched ballistic missiles, which the US cannot abide. Dropping both sublimits is the obvious compromise, though the US is unwilling to do this at this time.

Fourth, the US may be on the verge of making a major concession on mobile missiles. It will probably agree to drop its proposal to ban mobiles because the Soviets are unlikely to give up their SS-24s and SS-25s, and because influential Americans such as Sam Nunn and Brent Scowcroft believe mobility is the key to strategic stability in the 1990s.

This concession will, however, cause complications, since mobile missiles are particularly hard to detect and count. Verification techniques contained in the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty serve as a foundation for verifying road mobile missiles, but rail mobile missiles present new problems. They can be disguised as ordinary rail cars anywhere in the Soviet Union.

Already-agreed-to on-site inspection provisions could be supplemented with several new proposals, in-

cluding sublimits on mobile missiles, tamperproof tags that help identify missiles, and limited deployment zones. But verification procedures to prevent all cheating, not just militarily significant cheating, will probably not be possible in a START treaty that allows mobile missiles.

Fifth, the remaining unsolved treaty issues for air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) are counting rules, verification, and range. The US would simply designate each bomber capable of carrying ALCMs as having 10 missiles, regardless of the actual number. This would by definition require little verification. The Soviets fall back on the "as equipped" concept in SALT II, which would count each B-52H as having 20 ALCMs, and which would significantly restrict the US program. Numerical compromises on these problems appear possible.

Finally, a long list of unresolved verification issues have kept Washington's technocrats up until the early hours of the morning.

Various plans call for highly intrusive access to each nation's missile silos, bomber bases, naval vessels, and production facilities. A major conceptual stumbling block remains suspect site inspection, with parts of the US government wanting maximum inspection and others fearing Soviet spies. A compromise may be to establish categories of sites to be inspected if they are suspect.

These difficult issues will be traded off one against the other in a START endgame, perhaps during a heated presidential campaign. An agreement before November should help George Bush. But if it somehow backfired - under conservative attack, perhaps - the Democrats would have a last-minute advantage.

In any event, a new administration would likely inherit the responsibility of ratifying a controversial treaty, possibly without the opportunity to make its own modifications.

Under these circumstances, the Reagan administration should move cautiously and in full consultation with leaders of both parties.

Hans Binnendijk, director of studies at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, is former deputy staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.