

Special Analysis

USSR:

Gorbachev's Response to US Nuclear Initiative

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Gorbachev's nuclear arms control proposals would constrain Soviet nuclear capabilities and are intended to increase the pressure for further withdrawals of US nuclear weapons deployed along the Soviet periphery. His ability to respond quickly indicates that both republic and central authorities strongly support radical reductions in nuclear weapons.

Gorbachev's proposals emphasize his role in national security decisionmaking at a time when his authority is in doubt. His proposal for an early summit is meant in part to enhance his domestic standing. The proposals apparently have the support of the Defense Ministry and the Russian Republic leadership.

Gorbachev's proposed elimination of Ground Forces nuclear munitions will reduce the Soviet tactical nuclear stockpile by half. His emphasis on reciprocity in the withdrawal of tactical air and naval nuclear weapons indicates the Soviets still hope to draw Washington into negotiations on the timing and modalities of such reductions. If fully realized, these proposals would remove all US nuclear weapons from Europe and eliminate the threat of sea-based tactical systems. In the short term, however, the center will use any followup discussions with the US primarily to press the republics to agree to relocate nuclear weapons to Russia.

Gorbachev's announcements on future missile modernization affect ICBM programs known to be in development, but it is not clear which road-mobile program he was canceling.

Soviet negotiators yesterday clarified Gorbachev's offer to remove 503 ICBMs from alert status, claiming it includes 366 older single-warhead missiles and 137 older MIRVed missiles. These apparently do not include some 86 operational ICBMs in Ukraine, a fact that indicates central military authorities still plan on deployments there.

Gorbachev's pronounced willingness to discuss US proposals for nonnuclear ABM systems is the first official show of flexibility on this issue and marks a breakthrough. The Soviets probably would be receptive to proposals for joint programs that entail sharing US technology; they might try to involve international organizations in overseeing such programs.

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