

De-mystifying the cruise

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Ed Broadbent, leader of the NDP, warned recently that the cruise missile was "a dangerous first-strike weapon." This statement, coming from someone who should know better, demonstrates the unfortunate combination of emotionalism and politics that has greeted the U.S. request for Canada to test the cruise missile.

In fact, Ed Broadbent's statement is a perfect example of the misinformed pursuing the misunderstood. The cruise missile, really a robot airplane that flies at 550 m.p.h. at treetop level, is absolutely not a first-strike weapon.

The air-launched cruise missile must be carried by a mother aircraft to within 1,300 miles of its intended target; from this point, the small missile requires about 2.5 hours to attain the target. Once the mother aircraft are launched, the Russians would have over five hours warning as compared to the true first-strike weapons, ballistic missiles, which reach their targets in 30 minutes.

Besides being slow, the cruise carries a very small nuclear warhead that cannot destroy "hard" targets such as command posts, missile silos, or even factories protected with earth revetments. The cruise is designed to attack "soft" targets as part of a second strike after an initial exchange of ballistic missiles.

The economic role

The cruise was designed by the U.S. in the early 1970s, a time of drastic defence budget cuts, as a low-cost method of keeping Russia on the strategic defensive. The defence-minded Russians are so nervous about air attacks by America's 316 30-year-old B-52 bombers that they today maintain an incredible anti-aircraft force of 550,000 air-defence personnel, with 7,000 radars, 10,000 missile launchers and 2,600 interceptors — about 10 times the size of the combined U.S. and Canadian air-defence forces.

Military analysts estimate that the USSR spends 22% of its defence budget on air defence while the U.S. and Canada's defence force amounts to 258 antique interceptors dating from the 1950s. As the Russians have improved their air-defence technology, the ability of the B-52s to penetrate the Soviet defence zone has been greatly decreased; but the advent of the cruise missile has again put the Soviets at a disadvantage, allowing these bombers to fire the hard-to-stop missiles at a host of secondary, yet still important, Russian targets.

Striking with deadly accuracy at airfields, sea-ports, railyards, fuel supplies and other economic or civilian targets the cruise threatens Russia's ability to wage a sustained nuclear war.

The Russians have responded to the cruise by installing a new chain of Mach 6 SA-10 missiles, each backed by three radars, along with the MiG-25 Foxhound interceptor and its look-down-shoot-down AA-9 missile, targeted by IL-76 Candid AWACS radar planes.

In order to detect the low-flying cruise, the Russians are reportedly placing the SA-10 radar atop

tall, steel towers and have also extended a line of picket ships in the White and Barents Seas. Just as the Russians have put this expensive system into place, the Americans have announced they are converting to the new "Stealth" cruise that will be extremely difficult for even these new systems to detect.

Each SA-10 missile installation is estimated to cost the Russians over \$5.5 million: The necessary defensive screen to protect Russia's north may require over 10,000 launcher units and radars. The U.S. force of 2,000 cruise missiles, costing about \$5.5 billion is forcing the Russians, already straining under the weight of massive defence budgets, to spend another \$25-28 billion, not to mention new systems required to counter "Stealth" technology.

If the Russians were not spending these vast sums to counter the cruise, they would be allocating them in large part to offensive systems targeted against Western Europe and North America. Were the Russians able to transform their air defence troops into infantry, they could field a force against NATO almost equal in size to the entire West German army.

Low-cost weapon

This role of the cruise missile as an economic weapon is completely lost on its critics. The West, by using its advanced technology, is forcing the Russians to spend scarce funds on defensive systems that would otherwise go into missiles, tanks, aircraft and ships. The new American B-1 bomber and the "Stealth" cruise missile, planned for introduction in 1986, will ensure that this process continues and further perplexes and confounds Soviet defence planners.

The opponents of the cruise missile would do well to reflect on how the Russians would spend the vast sums in their military budget should this system be cancelled or limited. When the U.S. allowed Russia in the period 1963-1975 to attain parity in strategic missiles, Washington expected that the Soviets would then limit defence spending: Instead, Moscow surged ahead to gain superiority in missiles and, having attained this goal, then increased its land, naval and air forces by 25%, a process that continues today.

If Canada's refuse-the-cruisers can delay fielding of the cruise missile system, they will be doing Russia's defence planners a very useful service.

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