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Lengthy battle of the gab

If the Soviets and Americans will just sit down and talk arms reduction," say our hopeful liberals, "peace may blossom." They are thrilled by last week's agreement in Geneva between Washington and Moscow to begin arms-reduction negotiations.

Cynics, on the other hand, take a more circumspect view. The Americans and Russians have been talking about arms reduction for almost 25 years. Two SALT agreements and endless parleys have not exactly ended the arms race.

In 1962, for example, Russia had about 100 strategic nuclear warheads. Today, after the SALT arms-reduction agreements, it has around 15,000 warheads — and so does the U.S. Talks notwithstanding, the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and USSR have been enormously improved, over the past decades, in numbers, accuracy and reliability.

The forthcoming talks between Moscow and Washington will involve questions of such complexity that even the experts are hard pressed to deal with them. In fact, the two superpowers may spend months just deciding what questions to discuss. We should not expect any quick results.

Take, for instance, the basic question of what are strategic and what are tactical nuclear weapons. The Russians insist their SS-20 missile is a tactical weapon. But fired from northern Russia, it can reach Alaska — thus making it a strategic weapon. The Americans claim that the Soviets have secretly produced a third stage for the SS-20 that, when added on, gives it intercontinental range.

Are U.S. nuclear-armed carrier aircraft in the Mediterranean tactical or strategic weapons? They can reach southern Russia. Are Soviet Backfire bombers tactical or strategic weapons? They can hit any American target on a one-way flight or by landing in Cuba.

According to the SALT agreements, each side may build only one anti-ballistic missile system. Yet Russia appears to have fielded the components for at least three. When do components become operational systems? It may involve no more than wiring them together. These are the types of arcane questions that must be resolved before any progress can be made.

Worse yet, Washington is under intense pressure from American and European public opinion to reach an accord on arms reduction. If an agreement is not reached, the Democrats will be handed a superb political issue in the 1986 Congressional and 1987 presidential elections.

Russia, on the other hand, has little concern for its own public opinion and can negotiate at leisure, confident that Western opinion will force Washington to make major concessions. Moscow will use all of its powerful propaganda clout to put pressure on Washington. America, thus, starts off at a disadvantage.

In fact, the process of arms talks conducted under hyper media attention reminds me of medieval weddings where the bride and groom were surrounded in their nuptial bed by wellwishers shouting encouragements. Performing under such conditions is arduous, to say the least.

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Fortunately, Russia is under some pressure to reach an accord. Its stagnant economy is straining to make a recent 15% increase in defence spending. In terms of gross national product, Moscow spends 15%-18% on defence, over twice that of the U.S.

Ronald Reagan's new Star Wars anti-missile system is extremely bad news for Moscow. To match this space defence, Moscow will have to come up with at least \$130 billion over the next decade. Just to keep up with the wealthy Americans, Russia has to spend \$2 for every dollar invested by the Pentagon. The Americans, like poker players with unlimited credit, like this game.

Russia has neither the technology nor the money available to mount a Star Wars system. Attempting to do so will mean denying funds to the Soviet ground forces, something that Russia's tank generals will find unthinkable. As a result, Moscow's main priority in the upcoming talks is to convince Washington to scrap its lead in space weapons.

To gain this goal, Russia may have to agree to reduce its enormously potent arsenal of land-based heavy missiles. The prime American objective will be to get Moscow to scrap some of its SS-18 missiles, monsters that can carry 50-megaton warheads.

While these mind-bending matters of life and death are discussed, we may be assured that the Western media will turn the whole process into a three-ring circus. Reporters will demand daily "progress reports." Every smile or frown of negotiators will launch banner headlines.

We have only to think back to the media carnival over deployment of cruise missiles in Europe to get a foretaste of what the new arms talks will bring. The Russians, of course, are masters at this sort of thing.

The moral of this story is not to expect too much from the forthcoming talks. They may well drag on for years or end in mutual acrimony. Even if agreements are made, the outcome will certainly not inaugurate a new era of nuclear-free peace. While talks drone on, both sides will race to increase their arsenals.

And even if an improbable 50% cut in nuclear weapons is somehow achieved, both sides will still be left with 7,500 warheads, more than enough, if exploded, to send the earth spinning off towards Pluto. What's more, how do we know that scientists in some secret lab are not close to perfecting a new Z bomb?

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