

Underestimating the strategic threat

by Stanley Ezrol and Richard Cohen in Washington, D.C.

Has the Reagan administration misestimated Moscow's current intentions? White House Chief of staff James Baker III and others insist that following the deployment of U.S. Pershing II missiles in Europe, and following what administration officials have characterized as "expected" Soviet countermeasures, the Soviets will "sober up" and return to a "regular" although strained relationship with the United States. The centerpiece of these foolish predictions is that during the first six months of 1984, the Soviets will return with serious intentions to the negotiating table at the Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) talks in Geneva.

Administration insiders pointed to the successful U.S. military operation in Grenada, the fulfillment of the Euro-missile timetable, a toughening of the U.S. approach in regional hot spots, and a "hold firm" approach on the President's strategic rearmament program, as adding up to the required level of strategic initiative against the Soviets.

Reagan: 'They'll come back'

On Nov. 23, as the Kremlin began signaling its intention to go to direct military confrontation against the United States, President Reagan outlined for the press the assessment of Soviet intentions which was still dominating administration policy making. Asked if the Soviet walkout from the INF talks increased the possibility of a nuclear confrontation, the President answered, "No, I still don't believe there's a danger of a nuclear conflict. . . . I think they'll come back because I think they must be aware, as much as we are, that there cannot and must not be a nuclear confrontation in the world by the two nations that truly have the great destructive capability. . . . We're not going to sit here with false pride. We'll do everything that we can to bring them back."

Two days later, when State Department spokesman Alan

Romberg presented the administration's response to the Soviet announcement that "countermeasures" would be taken against the U.S. Euromissile deployment, he declared that the Soviet measures involved no new military threat. The modernization of the Soviets' missile force in Europe had "long been planned" and "they've had missiles and submarines off the U.S. Coast now for some time," he said. Asked if there was "anything new" in the Soviet threat, he simply restated those points.

Administration officials involved in policy making at the White House, Defense Department, and State Department have confirmed that, while the administration is concerned about "low-intensity" operations, including possible undeclared acts of war in the Third World and "big terrorism" in both the underdeveloped and advanced sectors, the administration is also convinced that the Soviets will seek to avoid a head-on confrontation.

Despite statements almost daily in *Pravda* accusing the United States of a "declaration of war" through the Euro-missile deployment and decisive evidence of a major military-economic mobilization (see article, page 35), the administration's assessment has apparently not yet changed. One private Soviet policy analyst in the administration orbit, who is generally viewed as more "alarmist" than most, told *EIR* on Nov. 30 that he considered the Soviet return to the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) to be evidence that the Soviet war preparations are not to be taken seriously. He explained that Andropov's "disappeared" status precludes any major new Soviet confrontation until either Andropov overcomes his current "political sickness" or a new leadership publicly emerges. He also predicted, as have other "insiders," that the Soviets will soon make a new offer, which the United States will accept. He, and others like him who

vociferously oppose Soviet gains in Central America and the Mideast, do not believe that the survival of civilization, as embodied in the existence of the United States and its allies, however imperfect they may be, is at risk over the coming months.

This group has cautioned the President, with apparent success, that "public opinion" has been "gripped with fear" as a result of the atmosphere created by the "coincidence" of the airing of the nuclear soap opera *The Day After*, the start of the Euromissile deployment, and the announcement of Soviet "strategic countermeasures." Mr. Reagan has been advised to be "sensitive" to these fears (which exist more vividly in James Baker III's murmurings to the President than in the American public), and scrupulously avoid any appearance of a warlike response to the Soviets.

Intelligence sources say that this Baker operation will soon be bolstered by a targeting of leading "hard-line" figures in the administration including Weinberger, CIA director William Casey, and United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. Weinberger and other Pentagon officials, including Marine Corps Commandant Paul X. Kelly, are to be attacked for their alleged negligence in providing for the safety of the Marine force in Lebanon. The role of Secretary of State George Shultz and James Baker III in insisting that the troops remain virtually unarmed in order to "look peaceful" will be ignored. More allegations of financial impropriety are being prepared against Casey.

In the midst of these pressures on the administration came a week-long series of meetings with Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Lebanon's President Amin Gemayel.

The policy difference within the administration on the Mideast is the difference between the Kissinger strategy of allying exclusively with Israel and using it against the other states in the region, and the grouping around Weinberger which believes that Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states must be brought into a larger cooperative role, provide facilities for Rapid Deployment Forces, receive sophisticated weaponry from the United States, and so forth. This latter grouping has argued that Israel's present policies do not coincide with the strategic needs of the United States, and that, therefore, the United States should make any expanded economic and military aid to Israel conditional on Israeli agreement to continue Camp David negotiations and carry out desired operations in Lebanon. The Kissinger group has argued that the administration cannot risk "alienating" Israel by making such demands, and that, in order to avoid taking direct military action in its own right, the United States must tolerate any Israeli action.

Despite reports that Reagan gave Shamir "everything but the ranch," none of the publicly announced agreements with Israel go beyond measures acceptable to both the Kissinger and Weinberger factions. Above all, the key strategic questions have apparently not been resolved. First, although administration officials have said that they recognize that the military and economic situation in Lebanon is "critical," "dangerous," and approaching a "catastrophe," no actions

beyond "reaffirmation" of the May 17 Lebanese/Israeli agreement have been announced. Likewise, although the administration recognizes that in order for Arab nations to join in any "strategic cooperation" with Israel, Israel must show a willingness to negotiate forthrightly on the future of the Palestinian population of the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza territories, nothing was achieved in this direction beyond Reagan's expressions of "concern" to Shamir over the continued Israeli settlements which amount to "creeping annexation" of the occupied territory, and the "quality of life" of Palestinians.

In meetings with Shamir, Reagan agreed, most importantly, to establish a permanent "Polito-Military Commission" composed of a United States contingent chaired by Rear Admiral Jonathan Howe, the Kissingerian director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, and an Israeli counterpart. The commission is to meet twice a year beginning in January 1984 to discuss joint U.S./Israeli military maneuvers, prepositioning of supplies for U.S. forces in Israel, and other measures to enhance the "strategic cooperation" between the two nations.

Special exemptions were made for Israel in the use of U.S. "Foreign Military Sales" credits for the production of Israel's new advanced jet fighter aircraft, the Lavie. Normally FMS credits are only used for purchases of weaponry produced in the United States, but the President agreed to allow Israel to use up to \$300 million in FMS money for R&D on the Lavie in the United States, and up to \$250 million for procurement of materials in Israel for the project. In addition, \$200 million was allowed to cover Israeli expenses in relocating from the Sinai occupied areas. An administration official announced that these measures were taken to "underscore our commitment to the Lavie Project."

In addition, the administration has announced its willingness to resume sales of "cluster shells" to Israel, sales suspended when it was determined that they were used during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in ways which endangered non-combatant civilians.

In return for these agreements, and possible additional assistance which intelligence sources tell us has been offered, Shamir has made no concessions on the question of the plight of the Palestinians in the occupied territories or on the question of the occupation of Lebanon. At a National Press Club luncheon which he addressed the day after meeting with Reagan, Shamir warned Lebanese President Amin Gemayel against any attempt to revise the May 17 agreement, which, after seven and a half months is yet to go into effect. "If the Lebanese people are interested to have a withdrawal of all foreign forces and to have a free Lebanon and a sovereign Lebanon, they will always support this agreement and they will not change a single word in it." On the question of resuming the negotiations over the West Bank provided for in the Camp David accord, Shamir had the *chutzpah* to accuse Egypt of violating the agreement by withdrawing its ambassador from Tel Aviv in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.