

Illusion outweighs reality at Baker-Shevardnadze meeting

by Nicholas F. Benton

As the ministerial meeting between U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze drew to a close in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, on Sept. 23, the Soviets appeared to have scored major gains in advancing both their military and economic aims.

The meeting represented the first crack the Soviets have been able to make in the Bush administration's reticence, during its first eight months, to take concrete steps toward irrevocably locking itself a commitment to shoring up the present Communist regime in Moscow. To hear senior U.S. administrators talk, as they did to the press the night before the meeting ended, they have swallowed the same Soviet deception line that characterized the infamous summits of the Reagan years.

At the meeting's conclusion, President Bush trod precisely in Reagan's footsteps, announcing that he would be holding a summit meeting with Soviet dictator Mikhail Gorbachov during late spring or early summer next year.

The SDI shell game

The most glaring example of U.S. naivete was, of course, the pronouncement that the Soviets agreed to decouple the outcome of talks on defense and space from the completion of a strategic offensive weapons (START) accord.

A U.S. official stated categorically that "the Soviets have shifted their position" on this, ostensibly dropping their efforts to hold progress on START hostage to efforts to kill the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program. A high administration official insisted that "this looks like a positive development," and said the U.S. responded by "offering an opportunity for Soviet government experts to visit several U.S. SDI facilities conducting SDI research."

But, in reality, the Soviets have made this same move at

least twice before at Reagan-Gorbachov summits: once during the infamous Reykjavik "pre-summit" in October 1986, and again at the Washington, D.C. summit in December 1987. Both times, they went back to Moscow to reassert their demand that agreement on their so-called narrow interpretation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty—which would kill the SDI by restricting its research—remain a precondition for progress on START.

Observers in Wyoming noted that the latest move by the Soviets to "decouple" the issues may have resulted from an agreement by the United States to curtail and circumscribe its SDI program. Rumors of a such a *quid pro quo* have been circulating for months, and resulted in numerous questions from reporters here whether such a tradeoff accounted for the new Soviet position.

A senior administration official did not satisfy anyone, however, when he said only that "the President has a continuing commitment to the SDI," and, when asked by this reporter "what kind of SDI program" the President told the Soviets he advocated, the official replied, "the President's commitment to the SDI is very well known." Nothing could be farther from the truth, since Bush administration officials have given mixed signals on the administration's approach to the SDI ever since Bush took office.

The Soviets also proposed that the two sides collaborate in developing some joint SDI tests within the "narrow" ABM definition.

Submarine-launched missiles accord?

The Soviets did more than "decouple" SDI from START in an effort to nudge the Bush administration over the edge toward a new arms agreement. Moscow proposed that an accord on limiting submarine-launched cruise missiles

(SLCMs) be developed outside, but parallel to, a START treaty.

The SLCM issue has been one of the biggest stumbling blocks to progress in START, since the United States does not want them included in the treaty at all, and the Soviets do. The U.S. position has been that it is impossible to verify the numbers of SLCMs.

But now, the United States is looking favorably on the new Soviet initiative, even though it came less than a week after reports were first published that an Akula-class Soviet submarine, which has "stealth" capabilities of eluding sonar detection, had appeared in the north Atlantic for the first time. When this reporter asked U.S. officials if they raised the issue of the Akula-class subs with the Soviets as an example of problems with verification on SLCMs, the response was a terse, "No."

Other initiatives toward advancing START included a proposal for "trial verification" procedures, which would permit Soviet teams to visit virtually every U.S. missile site and observe tests, under an "umbrella agreement on verification and stability" approach to START that includes a list of six "confidence-building measures."

New initiatives on open skies (permitting overflights of both Soviet and U.S. territories) and open land (eliminating restrictions on travel) were also advanced, and "common ground" laid for verification of mobile ICBMs.

Seven agreements were actually achieved. Six were signed, including the Memorandum of Understanding on Chemical Weapons, an accord pertaining to the Law of the Sea, two pertaining to the Bering Straits, one on strategic exercise notification, and a joint statement on the International Court of Justice. The seventh agreement reached was on the text of a document on the "Umbrella Agreement on Verification and Stability."

In addition to getting the arms control charade rolling again, the Soviets added a new component to such high-level superpower conferences, one equally vital to their global ambitions and even survival at this stage—economic cooperation.

The U.S. side appeared reluctant to enter into this discussion, at least publicly, despite reports that Baker was preparing some kind of huge economic accord for the ministerial meeting during his vacation in Wyoming last month. However, this may have been only a matter of appearances, since there were also reports of strong factionalization within the Bush administration over the issue of an economic bailout of the Soviets.

Nonetheless, the Soviets eagerness to put the economic question on the agenda at the meeting did prevail. While they acceded to the U.S. insistence that all economic discussions be characterized as "informal and not officially on the agenda," two lengthy meetings of experts on the subject were held. One of those meetings was held on the plane during the flight of Baker and Shevardnadze from Washington to Jack-

son Hole. The second was a dinner held between Soviet and U.S. experts, scheduled at the last moment Friday. The Soviet expert team was composed of economists Nikolai Shmelev and Aleksei Obukov, and the U.S. side was headed by the State Department's Robert Zellick.

A Soviet official told this reporter that his side pushed hard to get "economic issues" included in the formal agenda, added as a sixth "basket" to the five items—arms control, bilateral issues, human rights, regional issues and transnational issues—already agreed to.

In a report on the discussion of economics that occurred on the plane flight, the Soviets were cited as considering a plan to issue bonds as part of a "monetary stabilization package" in the Soviet Union which would deal with what they called a "ruble overhang" problem in the U.S.S.R.

A U.S. official reporting on the discussion commented that the Soviets were considering offering an interest rate that was "rather low, given their purpose, given the implicit inflation rates" in the Soviet Union. He said the Soviets were also looking toward reform of their property relations, competitive relations, the role of co-ops, and movement to a "safety net system."

A Soviet spokesman, reporting on the same discussion, stressed that the Soviets are "not coming with a list of requests for help" from the United States, but instead are "looking into the future." He said, "We are prepared to exchange experience. . . . We think that the possibilities are enormous, and that we should try to implement those, to realize them."

A Soviet spokesman added that Secretary Baker brought up the prospect for suspending the U.S. Jackson-Vanik Amendment during the first day in Jackson Hole. He said it came up during a discussion of human rights, after Shevardnadze detailed Soviet progress on emigration reform.

Jackson-Vanik denied the Soviets "most favored nation" trading status until they permitted free emigration of Soviet Jews, in particular. The Bush administration said earlier this year that it would repeal the amendment as soon as the Soviets formally passed laws permitting free emigration.

While U.S. State Department officials argue that Jackson-Vanik is not a major impediment to expanded U.S.-Soviet trade, the Soviets clearly see the issue differently, noting that the political significance of removing the impediment will contribute in a major way to enhancing the confidence of potential investors in the Soviet market.

While there were structural limits on how far the "Wyoming Economic Accords" could be advanced at this meeting, clearly the Soviets succeeded in laying the groundwork for getting the West to contribute in a major way toward their efforts to avoid further economic disintegration.

This was already made clear by the news, made public just prior to the Baker-Shevardnadze meeting, that U.S. Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan would accompany Zellick on a trip to the Soviet Union in late October.