

Statement by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Speakes on the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction Negotiations

May 15, 1986

Today in Vienna representatives of NATO and the Warsaw Pact resume their efforts to reach a verifiable agreement that would reduce and limit conventional forces in central Europe. These negotiations, known as the mutual and balanced force reduction (MBFR) talks, have the important goal of creating a more stable balance of forces at an equal and significantly lower level in central Europe, the area of greatest concentration of armed forces in the world. The MBFR talks are at an important stage of their 13-year history. Last December 5 the President joined other allied leaders in making a new, far-reaching proposal aimed at finding out if the Soviet Union is seriously interested in moving towards an accord in these long-running negotiations.

The Warsaw Pact had asked for a time-limited, first-stage agreement calling for initial reductions by U.S. and Soviet ground forces, followed by a freeze on all forces of the two alliances remaining in the area. In its December proposal, the West agreed to this framework. The East also insisted that progress could be made only if the West dropped its demand that the sides agree on the number of forces each currently has in the area before reductions begin. We agreed to this also, despite the fact that this demand had been a crucial part of the NATO position for over a decade. We

hoped the East would reciprocate our concessions and agree to Western verification proposals, a central remaining prerequisite to forging a viable agreement. Unfortunately, the East was not forthcoming during the round of negotiations that ended in March. Despite General Secretary Gorbachev's public declarations endorsing realistic verification measures for conventional force reductions, the Soviets did not respond positively in Vienna. Indeed, in response to NATO's concessions, the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies actually moved backward by rejecting the Western proposals and recycling old, shopworn verification ideas the East had made 2 or 3 years previously.

The Soviet leadership has now had additional time to give full and careful consideration to the details of NATO's December 5, 1985, proposal. In East Berlin on April 18, General Secretary Gorbachev again asserted that his government is committed to achieving reductions in conventional forces and pledged that these reductions will be assured through dependable verification, including on-site inspections. The President has instructed the U.S. negotiator, Ambassador Robert D. Blackwill, working with his NATO colleagues, to put these Soviet public claims on verification to the practical test at the negotiating table in Vienna.