

Soviet Swords and Plowshares

By Seymour Melman

Directors of institutes of the Soviet Academy of Science, officials of the State Planning Commission and a deputy foreign minister have assured me that it is now the policy of the Government and of Mikhail S. Gorbachev to support planning for conversion from a military to a civilian economy.

At a series of meetings in Moscow, while I attended the recent international forum on disarmament, Soviet officials pledged cooperation for planning and conducting an American-Soviet symposium on conversion from a military to a civilian economy.

The Soviet side is to be coordinated by the influential Institute on the U.S.A. and Canada, headed by Georgi A. Arbatov. The sponsor in the United States is the American Council of Learned Societies.

At the symposium, which probably will convene in America before the end of this year, both sides are to present papers on problems of con-

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verting military-oriented factories, laboratories and bases to civilian work.

To be sure, the pre-symposium research by participating engineers, economists, management specialists and planners does not automatically assure implementation by both governments. But the process of developing knowledge on conversion for both countries defines new policy options.

There are two main links between conversion planning and disarmament.

First, with workable economic conversion plans in place, a mutually agreed upon reversal of the arms race can be made into an economic opportunity and not a penalty for the people involved.

Second, growing confidence in the practicability of conversion will, I think, encourage disarmament negotiations.

Conversion could open major opportunities for economic development in both countries as millions of skilled minds and hands, and large capital resources, were applied to civilian tasks.

A conversion symposium held in Moscow in 1984 was of limited value because the American specialists

were not well-matched on the Soviet side. This is to be changed, apparently because Soviet officials now attach importance to economic conversion planning as one way of strengthening economic reconstruction.

This may help explain why the State Planning Commission, which had long taken the position that conversion planning would be carried on only after political détente with the United States, has changed its view.

In both countries, conversion requires that civilian products and production methods must be defined for facilities that have primarily served the military since the end of World War II. In both, conversion requires planning for retraining managers, engineers and workers who have long

been accustomed to ways of working that suit military needs but that are not serviceable for civilian work.

American policy still seems to rest upon the dogma that "the market" will cope with any adjustment to civilian work and that advance conversion planning is thus unnecessary. The Federal Government does not yet appreciate its indispensable link to national economic development. Not surprisingly, the Pentagon opposes legislation for conversion planning. One such bill has been proposed in the House by Representative Ted Weiss, Democrat of New York, along with more than 40 co-sponsoring colleagues.

This recent visit to Moscow — my sixth — was characterized by a degree of straight talk and cooperation by my hosts that was unprecedented in my experience. With little advance notice, visits were arranged to principal machine-tool factories, and I was quickly able to meet with senior officials in Government and in the Academy of Science.

This much is clear: Moscow's new initiatives toward economic conversion planning open up fresh opportunities for both Soviet and American policy, domestic and foreign. □

Shifting from
a military
to a civilian
economy.
