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BYLINE: W. JOSEPH CAMPBELL, Associated Press Writer

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BODY:

Once a week, a black Mercedes and three beige Fords bearing Russian diplomats, Red Army officers and faceless bureaucrats ease through the opened iron gates at the Soviet diplomatic mission and proceed in single-file formation down the Avenue de la Paix.

Three minutes later, at the end of the Avenue of Peace, the Soviets emerge with decided haste from their cars for a perfunctory reception. They are met by a handful of Americans waiting at the door of a building that houses U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency offices.

The routine, almost-ritual exchange of handshakes and nodded greetings is the only real public moment in the talks on intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe, talks that Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. once said "constitute a special category of East-West relations."

Since they were convened Nov. 30, the negotiations—the harbinger of parallel Strategic Arms Reduction Talks due to open in Geneva June 29—have been veiled in secrecy. And given the worldwide attention that is certain to be devoted to the opening of START, the talks on intermediate-range forces or INF are likely to recede further into the background.

At the outset of the INF deliberations, the two sides said a news blackout was a prerequisite for progress.

Never have they departed from that agreement to remain tight-lipped in Geneva about the results of their twice-weekly meetings. The sessions alternate between the Arms Control Agency offices and the Soviet mission compound where there is seldom occasion even to glimpse the negotiating teams.

Chief U.S. negotiator Paul H. Nitze, who has crafted and criticized American arms control policy since World War II, is known literally to turn his back on reporters asking about the course of the talks.

While staying well within the prescribed limits, Nitze's Soviet counterpart, Yuli Alexandrovich Kvitsinsky, delights in dropping cryptic, one-line hints. Asked once how the negotiation was proceeding, Kvitsinsky smiled and said, "As it should be."

Questioned on another occasion about what he was looking for from the talks, the 45-year-old Soviet, Nitze's junior by 30 years, replied with a smirk: "Success."

Success, however, has proved elusive after more than 30 rounds of arcane bargaining, which is to continue apart from the START negotiation.

Eugene V. Rostow, director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, said in London in early June that the INF talks "have not succeeded in overcoming, in any respect, the gaps between the two positions."

The differences seem staggering. The Soviets, for example, argue approximate parity prevails in intermediate-range weapons strength; the Reagan administration, however, says the Kremlin holds a 6-to-1 advantage, and possesses weapons for which the West has no match.

The basic U.S. position is essentially to swap its paper missiles for the Soviets' deployed missiles. The offer, commonly called the "zero option," proposes cancelling NATO plans to deploy a new generation of 108 Pershing 2 and 464 ground-launched cruise missiles in western Europe, beginning next year.

The Soviets, in return, would dismantle their imposing arsenal of about 600 SS-series weapons, most fearsome of which are 300 mobile SS-20 systems, each bearing three warheads with a range of 3,100 miles. They can strike targets anywhere in western Europe, as well as points in the middle East.

NATO has no weapon comparable to the SS-20.

The Kremlin has belittled the offer as "absurd," "ill-famed," and tantamount to unilateral disarmament. It insists that the U.S. medium-range bombers and missile-launching submarines assigned to Europe, as well as British and French nuclear strength, must be incorporated before there can be any genuine "zero option" negotiation.

Moscow has proposed mutual reductions in intermediate-range arms to "no more than 300 units" by 1990 and announced a unilateral moratorium on deploying SS-series missiles.

Washington has scorned the proposals as "spurious," arguing they would simply affirm the Soviets' advantage in such weaponry. Nitze—who comments more freely in Washington than in Geneva—said in the capital during a break in the deliberations: "If the U.S. deployment of intermediate-range missiles is frozen, there will be virtually no incentive for the Soviet Union to give up theirs; they have virtually completed their planned deployment of such missiles in Europe."

Rostow and other U.S. officials have said they suspect Soviets are counting on western Europe's anti-nuclear movements to soften NATO's resolve to deploy the 572 new weapons, Nitze's best negotiating cards.

"I've never expected the Soviet Union to come forward with a more constructive proposal," Rostow has said, "until about two weeks before the (new) missiles are to be deployed."