

To Fuel Summitry, Try Fusion Energy

By Flora Lewis

1985 JHT 13/14 April

ATLANTA — They will, they won't, they will, they won't . . . Soviet and American leaders have been backing around each other for years on the matter of whether or not to meet, and on what terms.

Despite the latest flurry of "clarifications" from President Reagan's entourage on when a summit conference is not a summit conference, there is little doubt that he will meet Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev this year.

The Russians have not ruled out a session at the United Nations this fall. The signs are that Mr. Gorbachev's missile freeze proposal is not a condition but a message that Moscow wants to raise important issues and will not be satisfied with a mere protocol encounter.

Soviet officials attending the Carter Center's Consultation on International Security and Arms Control indicate in Atlanta that Moscow's main concern is to thaw what Mr. Gorbachev has called the recent "ice age" in Soviet-American relations. Washington is worried about the propaganda effects if expectations for a new East-West spring in September are raised by too much fanfare.

Both sides are maneuvering, testing the atmosphere and looking for something they could take home as an achievement without paying important concessions. This is natural and should not be written off with cynicism.

The Geneva arms talks only opened last month. They cannot be expected to produce anything substantive until there has been a lot more probing. Even the notion of a freeze is much more complicated than it sounds, involving intricate definitions as well as questions of principle.

But a howdy-doo summit meeting, adorned perhaps with minor accords on fishing and ballet, would scarcely slake the yearning for evidence that the superpowers are veering off collision course. Like supertankers, it takes them a long time to complete a turn.

What matters is a clear direction. Simply talking "man to man" does not necessarily provide it, or assure better understanding. The important thing is to bring a sense of engagement in a search for ways to make the world safer and better off, a signal that something worthwhile has been started. As it happens, there is a good possibility that would serve everyone's interest but has been overlooked in the focus on difficult military issues.

An excellent candidate for an exciting, constructive accord would be a program for fusion energy.

Although fusion is the principle of the hydrogen bomb, it has no other military applications. Unlike existing nuclear fission reactors, fusion plants would present almost no risk of accident and dangerous waste products. The fuel is hydrogen, abundant in the sea. If it can be brought to economic viability, fusion energy would provide unlimited prospects of development to all, and relief from atmospheric pollution by heavy use of coal and oil.

Fusion research has been plodding along for more than 30 years, but there has been progress. Says Marshall Rosenbluth, a pioneer who heads the Institute for Fusion Studies at the University of Texas, "We can now feel very confident about the prospects." But, as he puts it, to solve remaining problems "will require a large-scale effort, perhaps too difficult and expensive for any one nation."

America is spending only \$400 million a year on this immensely promising new resource — the cost of less than half a dozen missiles in the MX program. The Soviet Union, the European Community and Japan have advanced research efforts. All have been exchanging information freely, even in the worst of times, because nobody can be hurt by progress toward this scientific miracle.

So fusion energy offers a long-term, highly rewarding peaceful enterprise for Soviet-American cooperation, together with Europe and Japan. It would be as dramatic a token of intentions as the defunct Soviet-American space program, and a lot more useful and enduring.

Evgenii Velikhov, who heads fusion research at Moscow's Kurchatov Institute, says a demonstration plant could be built within a decade to test engineering ideas, at a cost of about \$2 billion. Mr. Velikhov, a participant in the Atlanta consultation, believes that the Russians would be glad to join an international effort.

Secretary of State George Shultz and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko will meet in Vienna next month to discuss a summit conference. Putting a fusion program on the agenda would not avert the abrasive issues but it would promise at least one important success and brighten the horizon for the tougher talks.

The New York Times.