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National Intelligence Council

INTERAGENCY INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

3 September 1986

Soviet Strategic Forces in the 1990s in a No-SALT Environment

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This Interagency Intelligence Assessment was prepared at the request of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. It seeks, at his direction, to evaluate certain issues relating to the maximum size and capabilities of Soviet strategic forces over the next ten years in an environment where the restrictions imposed by the unratified SALT II Treaty are eliminated beginning in 1987. It is further assumed, for the purpose of this Assessment, that the Soviets view the likelihood of any new arms control restrictions on offensive strategic forces as very low during this period and that the Soviets choose to expand their forces beyond the expansion of warheads taking place within SALT limitations on MIRVed systems. Also, it is assumed--at JCS direction--that during the next ten years both the United States and the Soviets continue their expressed adherence to the ABM Treaty and no overt steps are taken by either side to abrograte that Treaty, although it is unclear if Soviet violation and compliance issues will be resolved to US satisfaction. [redacted]

[redacted] some information has been used from other coordinated Intelligence Community documents. Virtually all judgments are directly from, or consistent with, those in the above documents. Because of the assumptions directed by JCS, some additional judgments are included in this Assessment. [redacted]

DISCUSSION

Soviet Offensive Force Size

The Soviet Union now has about 10,000 deployed intercontinental strategic nuclear weapons (missile warheads and bombs). The SALT I and II Treaties do not prevent a substantial further expansion in the number of such Soviet weapons. We project that the ongoing vigorous Soviet strategic modernization program will likely lead to about 12,000 deployed warheads by 1990 within SALT

II quantitative sublimits, and a force of between 12,000 and 14,000 warheads without any SALT limits. Thus, there might well be little appreciable difference, in terms of total weapons, between the forces that the Soviets might deploy with and without SALT constraints.

It is difficult to predict precisely what the Soviets might do absent SALT constraints. Assuming future Soviet growth is essentially within the SALT constraints, the USSR's intercontinental strategic nuclear weapons are projected to increase to about 14,000 to 15,000 by 1996. Moreover, this expansion will result in Soviet replacement of most of the weapons in their strategic offensive forces with new or modernized weapons by the mid-1990s. They would not necessarily expand their forces significantly beyond the increases shown above--which are very large and would appear, in our judgment, more than enough to meet reasonable military requirements.

If a deliberate effort were made by the Soviet Union to expand its strategic forces beyond those we project as likely under SALT II levels, whether for military or political reasons, we estimate the Soviets have the potential to deploy between 16,000 and 20,000 strategic nuclear weapons by 1996. If the Soviets were to expand beyond SALT II limits, they probably would, by the mid-1990s:

--Deploy a MIRVed missile of the SS-25 class, to replace some or all of the single-RV SS-25s.*

--Retain, rather than dismantle, some older MIRVed ICBM and SLBM launchers, as they produce and deploy new mobile MIRVed ICBMs and SSBNs. (In this case, it is likely that in 1987 or 1988, the Soviets would exceed SALT II MIRVed sublimits, as a result of ongoing programs.)

--Deploy between 145 and 215 ALCM-capable heavy bombers. In our SALT II force, we project 160 such bombers. Most likely, the Soviets would want to be held accountable for only 120 ALCM-capable heavy bombers in a SALT II regime.

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* Another means for the Soviets to deploy more strategic warheads than we have projected, whether within SALT limits or beyond such limits, is to deploy new SLBMs with 14 RVs, rather than the 10 RVs projected for these new missiles. The deployment of more RVs on these missiles would be feasible, given the large throw weight of these missiles Such deployments could lead to an additional 500-1000 warheads within SALT II sublimits, and as many as 1,200 warheads in a no-SALT environment.

The lower end of the range, 16,000 warheads, assumes the latest reasonable dates of introduction and the lowest reasonable, deployment levels and production rates for new systems. The upper end of the range, 20,000 warheads, assumes the earliest reasonable dates of introduction for new systems and the highest reasonable deployment levels and production rates.

We judge it likely that, in the aggregate, the actual Soviet deployments, if they chose to exceed SALT limits, would be somewhere between 16,000 to 20,000 warheads. For planning purposes where single-figure estimates are needed, numbers somewhere near the middle of this range would seem reasonable; it is unlikely the numbers would reach the higher end. We cannot judge, within this range, the precise level that the Soviets would achieve in 1996 even if they undertook a concerted effort to achieve the higher end of that range, because of problems (unforeseen by us and probably the Soviets as well) in research and development or production of these weapon systems. We are uncertain of the likely production rates for some new, more sophisticated systems. In their development of some recent systems, the Soviets experienced growing difficulties and delays that have postponed or interfered with intended serial production. On the other hand, it is also possible that some systems will be deployed at somewhat greater rates than projected, or that new programs, not yet detected in development, will be deployed.

We judge that there is a very low probability that the Soviets would exceed a level of about 20,000 intercontinental strategic nuclear warheads by 1996. Soviet spending on strategic forces would increase substantially in order to carry out the extensive force modernization projected within SALT II numerical sublimits; an expansion of several thousand warheads beyond that would clearly require even higher expenditure levels. Further, we estimate that to build enough new warheads to exceed 20,000 nuclear warheads for intercontinental forces by 1996, the Soviets would have to reduce warheads for other nuclear forces below projected levels, electrical power output from their nuclear plants, or both. We believe an effort to reach the upper end of our "expanded force" or beyond, would seriously affect their prospects for achieving other high-priority objectives, such as the industrial modernization program, which the new Soviet leadership has made the centerpiece of its agenda for modernizing the Soviet economy. Moreover, the production and resource demands resulting from such emphasis on strategic growth during this period would significantly hamper the modernization of other forces, especially their general purpose and theater nuclear forces which would seem to be of high priority as well in an environment of a more intense, strategic relationship.

The Soviets would likely respond to any perceived substantial expansion of US offensive or defensive strategic forces beyond arms control limitations with a reassessment of their strategic force posture that could lead to decisions to reposture their forces, initiate new weapon programs, and increase force size. It is unlikely, however, that such actions would have much effect on their force size over the next ten years, but it is possible

that after the mid-1990s their forces would begin to grow at a rate somewhat faster than we expect. By the late 1990s and beyond, the Soviets could begin deploying a significantly different force than we project for the next ten years. [redacted]

Soviet Capabilities Against US Forces

Our judgments about Soviet capabilities to locate and target effectively US SSBNs at sea and mobile missiles in the mid-1990s do not differ for Soviet forces with or without the current SALT constraints. [redacted]

This issue is unaffected by the presence or absence of SALT limitations. [redacted]

For Soviet potential to attack US mobile ICBMs [redacted]

In a no-SALT environment, the Soviets would likely desire to increase the number of warheads they could use against mobile-based ICBMs, and this might be a factor in any attempt on their part to increase their intercontinental strategic warheads toward the 20,000 level. Nevertheless, even if they did reach 20,000 weapons by the mid-1990s, the above judgments would remain valid, provided a robust US mobile ICBM deployment occurs. In such a case, the Soviets would likely attempt to devise a more efficient approach to locating and targeting, rather than simply depending on a barrage approach. [redacted]

Soviet Accuracy and Reliability

We judge that the accuracy and reliability that we project for Soviet missiles and aircraft in 1996 is essentially independent of SALT constraints. (We note that neither SALT I nor II in any way affects either accuracy or reliability).

--The Soviets will strive for an across-the-board improvement in the reliability of their missiles and will do so regardless of the status of SALT constraints.

--The Soviets will achieve accuracy improvements--especially for systems designated to strike hardened targets--by 1996 regardless of the status of the SALT accords. [redacted]

Mobile and Hardened Strategic Targets in the USSR

The number of Soviet strategic force assets that would be mobile in the absence of the current SALT constraints does not differ significantly from the number we project for 1996 assuming the current SALT constraints. The difference in deployment levels of the SS-X-24 and SS-25 between SALT and no SALT force levels would provide the primary difference in the mobile target base. The remainder of the mobile strategic nuclear assets, primarily intelligence, command, control, communications, and would be basically the same in either a SALT or a no-SALT environment. It is conceivable that in a no-SALT environment, the number of mobile ICBM launchers might actually be fewer than the number we project in a SALT environment (because in a no-SALT environment many SS-25-class launchers would be MIRVed). Conversely, the number could increase. Indeed in the low end of our "expanded force" for 1996, there is a decline of 45 mobile launchers [redacted] over the "SALT force" projection. At the high end of the "expanded force" we project an increase of some 185 mobile launchers [redacted] over the "SALT force". [redacted]

By 1996, we project a reduction in the number of hard targets in the Soviet strategic attack forces target set due to the reduction in the number of ICBM silos, as the Soviets replace most light and some medium silo-based ICBMs with mobile ICBMs. We project this reduction for both the SALT-constrained force and the expanded force. However, we project a slightly higher number of deployed silo-based ICBMs without SALT constraints. [redacted]

In 1996, with or without SALT constraints we estimate that, 52 percent of the strategic attack forces will be soft ; and 48 percent will be hard . This is in contrast to the current (1986) ratio of 40 percent soft and 60 percent hard

Soviet Strategic Defensive Forces

Given the assumption that the ABM Treaty remains in effect for the next ten years, we judge that the Soviets will improve their deployed ABM capability with the current upgrade of the Moscow system and will enhance their capability to break out of the ABM Treaty with conventional ABM systems. Furthermore, they will likely make substantial progress in development and testing of on advanced technologies such as groundbased lasers and probably space-based lasers with applicability to ASAT and BMD. Moreover, we judge the Soviets will enhance the capabilities of their SAM systems in such a way as to lead to a further blurring of distinctions between antiaircraft and ABM capabilities. (See NIE 11-3/8-86 for discussions of differing views on Soviet ABMs and SAM upgrade capabilities).

It is difficult to forecast a significant difference in effort along these lines, as a result of no limitations on offensive forces. Furthermore, it would be difficult to attribute any increased Soviet efforts in BMD as resulting from a no-SALT environment.

We project force levels for Soviet air defense systems (SAMs and fighters) that represent a reasonable range for likely future force size for the next ten years. They represent a steady modernization of Soviet defenses with increases in firepower by more capable systems, but with somewhat fewer total numbers of systems deployed. With either constrained or unconstrained offensive forces, we anticipate the Soviets would produce essentially the same range of new air defense systems in the next ten years as we have been projecting. It is possible that toward the end of the ten-year period, the Soviets would have some more fighter aircraft and possibly Mainstay AWACS than we project if the US significantly increases its bomber force beyond current Soviet anticipation. We note that any Soviet effort to significantly increase their offensive force may well affect Soviet capabilities to simultaneously produce additional new air defense systems. Further, in the face of a significantly larger US bomber force the Soviets may slow significantly the removal of older air defense systems from their forces, particularly those that they judge might have some value in an intense ECM environment.