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THE FATEFUL ILLUSIONS OF SALT II

A look at the hard facts behind the most serious foreign-policy/military-strategy debate of the decade

By Ralph Kinney Bennett

Stretching the length of the Soviet Union, from the Carpathians in the west to the Stanovoi Range in the east, is a deadly constellation of concrete—1500 intercontinental-ballistic-missile silos. About once a month, an SS-17 or SS-18 is test-fired from one of them. Then, from a huge underground "hold building," another missile is drawn to refill the silo.

How many ICBMs are in these underground buildings? We don't know. How many additional missiles are hidden in the vast Soviet landmass? Again, we don't know.

FOR MORE THAN six years now, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks designed to fashion the SALT II treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union have produced a thick smog of political rhetoric and mystifying mathematics. When you penetrate this mist, you encounter two grave facts:

1. *SALT II would not limit the number of missiles and nuclear warheads in the Soviet arsenal.* Contrary to the impression fostered by our government, it would merely limit launchers, the devices from which missiles are fired. Accordingly, nuclear-weapons limitation, the primary objective of the United States when it entered the talks, is not in the agreement.

2. *Despite our satellites, radars and other electronic sensing devices, we have been unable to determine the true size of the Soviet strategic missile force.* Thus, accurate, unimpeachable data, the very basis for a rational agreement of any kind, are missing from SALT II.

In the light of these facts, the American people, through their Congress, must seriously question whether an arms agreement should, or even *can,* be made with the pathologically secretive Soviets.

Hidden Story. Common sense dictates that the most important factors in assessing Soviet strategic strength are the number and characteristics (range, accuracy, destructive power) of their missiles and warheads. From the outset of SALT negotiations, however, it became clear the Soviets would not share any such information. And, since it has been impossible by satellites and other technical means to gain complete, accurate knowledge, we have been forced to rely on imperfect and sometimes erroneous intelligence estimates.

A satellite camera cannot see through the roof of a missile plant. Furthermore, the Soviets often move missiles out of their factories at night, and in random batches, to frustrate estimates of their rate of production. And the four principal Soviet missile works—at Moscow, Gorki, Dnepropetrovsk and Bisk—are frequently hidden by thick cloud cover.

So, our common sense gave way to a curious kind of convenience. Since ICBM silos are extensive constructions not easily concealed, U.S. intelligence began counting launchers instead of missiles. "The primary currency of the [SALT] negotiations became limits on the number of launchers, not limits on missiles or their characteristics," says former SALT negotiator Paul Nitze. "This has proved to be the wrong currency."

Just how wrong can be judged by examining the evolution of Soviet missile forces. In recent years, 1200 Soviet ICBMs have been removed from their silos and replaced by more sophisticated models. Western intelligence sources puzzle over what happened to those 1200 "old" missiles. Satellite photographs reveal no trace of where the ICBMs were taken. (Between 200 and 300 have been fired in mass training exercises.) Some may still be nearby, in the huge factory-like buildings at each of the 26 ICBM complexes. Others may be in extensive underground installations the Soviets are known to have been building since World War II.

The 1200 replaced missiles are only part of the hidden story. An ICBM must be periodically removed from its silo for maintenance, such as replacement of worn guidance gyroscopes (constantly spinning inside the missile). For this reason, Russian ICBM complexes keep a "maintenance float" of extra missiles. In addition, there is a "pipeline float"—missiles to replace damaged or malfunctioning ICBMs. These extras could constitute another 2000 operational ICBMs beyond the 1200 replaced missiles.

Beware a "Breakout." The possibility of such hidden missiles raises the question of what the Soviets plan to do with them. A close examination of Soviet capability and strategic doctrine provides a sobering clue.

When American ICBMs are launched, equipment in their silos is heavily damaged by takeoff blast. Skilled construction crews would need six weeks to repair a Minute-

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man silo to fire another missile. This is accepted because of our belief that a nuclear war would be one great, fiery "spasm" with no second round.

The Soviets have a decidedly different view: A nuclear war is to be fought and *survived*—no matter how destructive. The U.S.S.R. therefore emphasizes the *re-use* of missile launchers. The latest Soviet missiles are encased in a canister with a compressed-gas generator. The gas pops the missile out of the silo *before* the engines ignite to send the missile on its way, leaving the silo undamaged. With this "cold-launch" technique—an American idea once turned down by our Defense Department, then picked up by the Soviets—U.S. missile experts estimate that the Soviets could launch a second ICBM from the same silo in as little as two hours after the first.

When our negotiators brought up the reload-refire matter in the SALT II talks, the Soviets agreed not to develop, test or deploy a "rapid" reload system—but only after insisting that their launchers did not fall into this category. Nevertheless, satellite and other intelligence indicates that about half of Soviet silos have been or will be fitted with cold-launched missiles (SS-17s, SS-18s and newer ICBMs now being developed).

Many defense analysts are deeply concerned that the potential hidden storehouses of Soviet ICBMs, backed up by this refire capacity, may enable the U.S.S.R. to achieve a "breakout" —a sudden deployment of weapons that, as the Congressional special subcommittee on SALT put it, "could quickly tip the strategic advantage" in their favor.

Added Worries. Even by the conservative estimates used in SALT II, the Soviets will have at least 7000 thermonuclear warheads by 1985. Breakout could suddenly add many more. The United States stopped production of enriched uranium for nuclear weapons in 1964, hoping the Russians would follow suit. Instead, the Soviets increased production and continue it today.

And, though our atmospheric sensors give us a general idea of Soviet nuclear-weapons-material production, without their coöperation we have no *exact* knowledge of how many warheads they are stockpiling. One highly placed intelligence source in Washington says, "Altogether there could well be twice as many warheads in the Soviet arsenal as our SALT negotiators believe will be deployed."

An added worry is the SS-16 ICBM. The Soviets have used two stages of this large missile to create a smaller, mobile one—the SS-20. Although a protocol to SALT II would prohibit deployment of a mobile ICBM system before 1981, at least 100 SS-20s have already been deployed.

The Soviets claim this is an "intermediate-range" ballistic missile, poised mainly against NATO forces in Europe, but one group of these missiles has been spotted in the center of the Soviet Union at an apparent ICBM installation. And analysts are wary of Soviet claims that the SS-20 is not of intercontinental range. Our monitoring indicates that when the Soviets tested it they loaded on 1000 pounds of ballast. If this unnecessary weight was eliminated, the missile could easily be of ICBM range.

And the SS-16 itself is a subject of concern. Many SS-16 first stages were built, but then disappeared. These first stages could be quickly mated to the two stages that make up the SS-20, thus throwing another large ICBM into the strategic balance at some critical moment. Moreover, an SS-16—in fact, all Soviet ICBMs—*need not be fired from a silo.* They could be launched from virtually any pre-surveyed (for guidance) site, even from inside a building with a false roof.

How many SS-16s and SS-20s are there? We don't know.

Cat-and-Mouse Game. The Soviets can precisely gauge our missile force simply by attending appropriations hearings on Capitol Hill, reading the aerospace press or looking at easily obtained maps showing the nine Air Force bases where our ICBMs are located. By contrast, trying to learn about a new Soviet missile involves imprecise, long-range detective work.

For the most part, we rely on radar tracking of test firings and the reading of intercepted telemetry—the flow of electronic information sent back to the ground by the missile itself. Experts further attempt to get a "thumbprint" of a [illegible] silo, cranes and service vans at a launch site. But the uncoöperative Soviets play cat-and-mouse with us by disguising equipment, encoding the telemetry coming from a missile and even hiding its true flight characteristics by adding or subtracting weight.

Our detective work has recently become even more difficult. The sale of the operational manual of our KH-11 satellite to the Soviets by a CIA employe has enabled them to take steps to elude the satellite's photographic and electronic sensing equipment. And the U.S. pullout from Iran, where we operated an extensive array of radar and sensing devices, has severely hampered eavesdropping on prime Soviet test ranges.

Intelligence analysts are proud of our surveillance technology, but they feel we may have been oversold on it by those eager to promote arms control. Some spy-satellite cameras can pick out objects the size of a pie plate. But the cameras can't penetrate darkness or clouds. And in covering the huge Soviet landmass, satellite analysts must look where they think they will find something. In the mid-1970s the Russians constructed four gigantic radar installations, possibly the largest in the world, near the Arctic Circle. It was two years before our satellites detected all of them, and then only after a tip from a defector.

Vast numbers of such Soviet military installations have been spotted by satellites, but remain shrouded in mystery. More than 150 heavily guarded, Pentagon-size structures, obviously of high military value, have been pinpointed all over the Soviet Union. But what goes on inside them?

The limitations of our surveillance systems make many experienced intelligence analysts incredulous at the smooth assurances of the State Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency that we will be able to "verify" SALT II.

Raging Controversy. The Administration says SALT II is the "centerpiece" of American foreign policy, an important step in stopping the "arms race" while preserving strategic "equivalence." But SALT II critics

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point to the steady decline of U.S. strategic strength and the dramatic growth of Soviet power that have accompanied the protracted negotiations. They see the lack of true constraints in the treaty and the concomitant American trend of unilateral arms limitation (cancellation of the B-1 bomber, delay of the MX missile) as ensuring the Soviets, within the next half decade, the capacity to destroy our ICBM force while using less than half of their missile force.

Yet the real problem with SALT lies outside the treaty—in the great unknown concerning true Soviet ballistic-missile and warhead production. It seems almost inconceivable that the United States has allowed so many years of negotiations (and U.S. concessions) to go by without obtaining the most rudimentary information from the Soviets about their missile production. A rational revelation of their strategic inventory—and the *certain* means of confirming the figures—should have been the premier and absolutely non-negotiable demands of the United States. Unless that great unknown is pierced, SALT II limitations on "launchers" are meaningless, and neither an elaborate treaty nor the interest of Moscow in true "peaceful coexistence" can be counted upon.

Truth or Consequences

The Soviet doctrine regarding the utility of nuclear weapons is quite different [from ours]. As we are finally beginning to realize, the Soviets are not interested in mutual deterrence and nuclear stalemate. To the Soviets, clear nuclear superiority is the ultimate weapon of coercive diplomacy—through which they think they could achieve checkmate without having to fight either a nuclear or a conventional war.

The debate over SALT II presents a unique opportunity for telling this truth. If, mesmerized by old illusions about disarmament and new ones about détente, we accept the treaty, we will be taking not a step toward peace but a leap toward the day when a President of the United States may have to choose between the surrender of vital national interests and nuclear holocaust. But if we see the SALT II treaty for what it truly is—American acquiescence in the Soviet drive for overwhelming military superiority—we will give ourselves a last chance to restore the strategic balance that is the only guarantee of peace in the nuclear age.

—Former Under Secretary of State Eugene V. Rostow in *Commentary*