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Are SALT 2 treaty critics realistic?

The past record, says the author, indicates that today's alarmists haven't learned their lesson

By George Kistiakowsky

In the coming months Americans will be facing great decisions about the future of our defense policy and our relations with the Soviet Union.

Should we decide to accept in good faith the spirit of SALT II as a limitation on the arms race — a limitation that is in fact already largely known by the public — and introduce the minimum of new weapons consistent with our security? Or, if the SALT treaty is signed, should we stretch its provisions and build as many arms as are not forbidden by it? Or, finally, should we reject the treaty and choose to increase vastly our spending on strategic weapons in an attempt to achieve military superiority over the Soviet Union?

In recent months a great many books, articles, speeches, and advertisements — even a privately produced and widely distributed film — have been circulated in order to convince the American public that Soviet strategic power is growing while American defenses are weakening. We are told again and again that our national safety is in jeopardy.

The hawks who want to convince the American public that the danger is growing severely criticize the SALT II treaty now being concluded under which each side would limit itself to no more than 2250 strategic missile launchers and bombers between now and 1985. The proposed treaty is said to concede too much to the USSR, perpetuating our weakness and consolidating the Soviet threat.

Such predictions are indeed frightening, but are they realistic, or even plausible? The past record of the arms race argues strongly that they are not.

To understand the current opponents of SALT, we must first understand how wrong they have been in the past.

Between the late 1950s and the early 1970s US strategic policy was distorted by foolish reactions to a false alarm: that the Soviets were building vast antiballistic missile systems — the ABM — that could destroy most of the deterrent missiles we would launch after the Russians attacked, thus giving them a decisive advantage in a nuclear war.

This alleged threat not only provided the main pretext for our own expensive and useless efforts to set up an ABM system, mainly in the 1960s. It also was one of the main justifications, in the late 1960s, for the MIRVing of our missiles, so that a single missile would carry several warheads, each aimed at a different target.

While working on Eisenhower's scientific advisory committee in 1959 and 1960 I had to assess some of the early claims that the Russians were developing an ABM system.

The Soviets, we knew from our intelligence, had a center for anti-aircraft and anti-missile work at Sary Shagen in Central Asia. Our U-2 planes observed there a large radar installation that *might*, it was thought, be a device for detecting incoming missiles. Our intelligence experts immediately linked this installation to the Soviet tests of medium-range ballistic missiles at Kapustin Yar, many hundreds of miles to the west.

The evidence was hardly conclusive that an effective ABM system was being tested at Sary Shagan, but it was enough to encourage the US Air Force and Navy to develop "penetration aids" to be used on American missiles in order to confuse a Soviet ABM system.

The Army justified its campaign for the earliest possible installation of our own ABM project — with the code name Nike Zeus — by citing the tests at Sary Shagan.

Notwithstanding pressure from the Army, defense contractors, and influential senators, my colleagues and I on the President's Science Advisory Committee concluded that Nike Zeus defenses, while effective against single missiles, would not be useful against a massed attack. Eisenhower refused to order the Nike Zeus system to be installed.

But this was only the beginning of the Soviet ABM scare. In 1961 — after the three-year moratorium on nuclear testing was ended by the Soviets — explosions near Sary Shagan and a defense installation being constructed near Leningrad were interpreted by proponents of the "worst possible case" as evidence that the Soviets were building a huge defense system that would eventually be able to launch thousands of ABM interceptor missiles.

During 1961 and 1962 Pentagon officials were making plans to react in kind. They, and their supporters, claimed the Leningrad defense work justified the development and installation not only of Mike Zeus but also of multiple warheads. (MRVs).

In the mid-Sixties such warheads were indeed deployed on the American strategic missiles in Polaris II submarines — a major step. And although proposals by Sen. Strom Thurmond and others for the immediate de-eployment of Nike Zeus were defeated by the Kennedy administration, these alarms about Soviet ABM armaments encouraged the development of Nike X, a more advanced system designed to defend us from a large number of simultaneous incoming missiles.

In fact, later on in the 1960s, it turned out that the constructions near Leningrad were abandoned. The evidence suggested they were merely anti-aircraft defenses. But the damage was done; we had already gone ahead with our plans for MRVs.

During the 1960s the Russians themselves did much to exacerbate these fears, particularly after the humiliation of the missile crisis of 1962. If, as seems likely, they boasted about having impressive ABM defenses in an attempt to conceal their own weakness in strategic weapons, they only played into the hands of the Pentagon hard-liners.

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Among the leaders of this Pentagon group was Dr. John Foster, then the director of Defense Research and Engineering, who had long been active in efforts to convince Congress that the Soviet ABM system justified increased American armament.

The flight-testing of MIRVed Minuteman and Poseidon missiles was begun in August 1968 and completed in June 1970 when MIRVed Minuteman III missiles were first deployed. Despite growing skepticism about the Soviet ABM force, Pentagon spokesmen continued to argue that MIRVs were essential for penetration of Soviet ABM defenses.

In 1969, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird said: "By the mid-to-late 1970s Soviet startegic air and missile defenses could be quite formidable."

This was another false alarm. But it led the Senate to approve, although by only one vote, the installation of four sites for American Safeguard missiles.

In 1972 the SALT I treaty so restricted ABM deployments that they no longer can be regarded as a significant military threat. But accompanying the false alarms about the Soviet ABM throughout the 1950s and 1960s were equally distorted claims about the danger of the Soviet offensive strategic arsenal and these continue today.

Again the Russians' own claims were exaggerated. During the 1950s, Khrushchev talked proudly about Soviet production of long-range missiles. In 1957, the White House appointed a secret group directed by H. Rowan Gaither to assess the Soviet threat. This group and other hard-liners, predicted a catastrophic "missile gap" — claiming that by 1959 as many as 150 Soviet ICBMs would be aimed at the US.

This was a wholly false scare. In fact, by the end of 1960 the USSR had deployed at most half a dozen virtually unserviceable ICBMs.

The Russian development of ICBMs produced a new campaign in Washington for a US ABM system. When Nixon took office in 1969, the new administration proposed that the Sentinel city defense system — part of the US ABM network that was never built — be installed, without major technical changes, but under a different guise.

It would not be used to defend the cities, but rather would be set up at the Minuteman silo sites, functioning as the so-called "Safeguard" defense against a Soviet surprise attack.

Despite considerable opposition in Senate hearings, the administration continued to support the Safeguard system.

During the summer and fall of 1969 Secretary Laird and Henry Kissinger, who was then assistant to the president for National Security Affairs, pressed the director of the CIA to increase the CIA's estimate of the future threat that Soviet missiles posed for the Minuteman force.

Kissinger is said to have urged the CIA to reconsider its estimate that Soviet SS-9 missiles were armed only with MRVs, as they were, and to have made clear his own view that these missiles were MIRVed, which they were not.

Here we come to yet another case, and a crucial one, where false alarms led to the escalation of the arms race.

In 1969, when it was not yet clear that either the USSR or the United States had a workable MIRV system, it might still have been possible to agree with the Soviet Union tp prevent or delay the deployment of MIRVs.

When American preparations for the SALT talks began in the fall of 1969, it was proposed by one of the administration agencies that we seek a moratorium on MIRV testing. This suggestion was firmly rejected, it was said, by our Joint Chiefs of Staff.

What in fact was the evidence that the USSR was going ahead with MIRVs? Here the public was again misled. In 1968 we had observed Soviet test flights of a new heavy ICBM: the SS-9. American intelligence noticed a "triplet" of vehicles reentering the atmosphere together. Were the triplets MIRVs, or were they the more primitive MRVs, which cannot be targeted independently, and which resemble buckshot although on a much grander scale?

Laird commented on the triplets in January 1969: "The Soviets are going for our missiles and they are going for a first strike capability. There is no question about that."

Dr. Foster supported Laird's view that the SS-9 triplets were MIRVs designed to attack our hard targets.

In fact, however, a substantial number of experts in the intelligence community concluded that the triplets were only MRVs.

They were right, and the widely reported assertions of Laird and Foster were wrong. The Soviet Union, we now know, did not begin to test MIRVs until 1973 and did not deploy them until 1975.

Among the missiles that are currently deployed in the Soviet Union, the SS-18 and SS-19 have MIRVed warheads and are capable of yet greater throw-weight — a traditional Soviet strength.

The main scare being spread by the opponents of SALT II is that the USSRs 820 MIRVed ICBMs could carry many thousands of the new, more accurately guided Soviet MIRV warheads. Some of these, it is alleged, could destroy 95 percent of the Minuteman force in an initial counterforce attack. This would leave the USSR enough strategic warheads to threaten to totally destroy the United States should we launch our remaining forces in an efeebled rataliatory strike.

Like many other fearful predictions of strategic weakness, however, this one is based on false and simplistic assumptions — among them, in this case, that the American strategic force consists overwhelmingly of land-based ICBM missiles.

In reality fewer than 25 percent of American strategic warheads are stored in Minuteman silos; the rest are carried by submarines and aircraft. And by the mid-1980s the fraction in silos will probably be even lower — assuming that Trident submarines and cruise missiles are deployed as planned.

Indeed the so-called "triad composition" of our strategic forces — the distribution of warheads in silos, submarines, and bombers — was designed to reduce the threat of a Soviet first strike aimed at our land-based missiles.

The current alarmist scenario does not account for the several thousand warheads on American bombers and submarines, which would certainly survive a Soviet surprise attack, and would assure our retaliatory strikes.

Each of these warheads is powerful enough to devastate most of the Soviet cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, which also contain most Soviet industry. Our submarines could sustain the attack for several months.

American hard-liners argue that the United States has not kept up with the expansion of Soviet strategic forces. In fact, since we began to MIRV our missiles in 1970, the number of our strategic warheads has more than doubled, and most of our older missiles have been replaced by the new Poseidon and Minuteman III, the latter more accurate than any the USSR now possess.

During the past eight years we have deployed approximately as many new missiles as the Soviet Union has. The only difference is that we chose to place them in existing submarines and silos, while the Soviets continued to build new launchers until they reached the limits specified by SALT I.

As a result the Soviet ICBM force is numerically greater than ours and includes a number of very large MIRVed missiles, which could theoretically pose an effective threat to the Minuteman force if the accuracy of Soviet guidance were considerably improved.

Unlike the United States, the

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Soviets do not have a triad of equally potent strategic forces. Their strategic bomber force is small and obsolescent; nor is a part of it kept on continual alert, as our SAC bombers are.

Mr. Carter should stress that our present defenses are impregnable, that our will to resist aggression is firm, that — if we do not start another round of the strategic arms race — the SALT II treaty will improve our national security and allow us to give greater attention to domestic problems.

Only in this way can we break out of the vicious circle of alarmism and escalation that has characterized the nuclear arms race for more than 20 years.

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