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Soviet Attitudes Toward Salt

Submitted by

*R. E. Cushman, Jr.*

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the

UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf

19 February 1970

Authenticated:

*James N. Lay Jr.*  
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, USIB

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The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State and Defense, the AEC, and the NSA.

*Concurring:*

Dr. R. J. Smith, for the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

Mr. George C. Denney, Jr., for the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State

Lt. Gen. Donald V. Bennett, the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency

Dr. Louis W. Tordella, for the Director, National Security Agency

Dr. Charles H. Reichardt, for the Assistant General Manager, Atomic Energy Commission

Mr. William C. Sullivan, the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

19 February 1970

SUBJECT: SNIE 11-16-70: SOVIET ATTITUDES TOWARD SALT

NOTE

SNIE 11-16-68, "The Soviet Approach to Arms Control," 7 November 1968, SECRET, dealt with the attitudes the Soviets might be expected to bring to talks on limiting strategic weapons (SALT). It discussed how such factors as the USSR's economic position and its view of the strategic relationship with the US might be thought to bear on the Soviet approach to SALT. The present paper examines some of these questions again in the light of the attitudes and positions the Soviets revealed at Helsinki in November and December 1969, and offers some conjectures about possible Soviet positions on certain key issues in the next stage of talks, scheduled to open in Vienna on April 16.

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DISCUSSION

How the Soviets Saw Helsinki

1. It was plainly the view of the Soviet delegation at Helsinki that the first round of talks was to be no more than preliminary and exploratory. But the Soviets were also intent on demonstrating by their demeanor -- the avoidance of propagandistic or tendentious debating tactics -- that Moscow was ready for a serious exploration of the prospects for strategic arms control. They wanted, in return, renewed evidence of American "seriousness."

2. The essential test of this seriousness, in the Russian view, is whether the US is ready to acknowledge that it does not think of itself as bargaining from a position of strategic superiority and will treat with the USSR as an equal. Thus, at Helsinki, the Soviets tried to satisfy themselves that the US did not aim to use the talks as a lever to obtain concessions from the USSR on other international issues; among other reasons, because they did not want the impression to be left that the USSR needed arms control more than the US did. So too, the Soviets insisted that an arms control agreement must assure "equal security" for both sides and not give a military advantage to either.

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3. Other than to carry out this kind of broad reconnaissance of US intentions, the instructions of the Soviet delegation at Helsinki seemed to call generally for letting the US take the lead in opening substantive issues. The Soviets were quick, however, to endorse certain broad propositions which the US put forward as essential premises for an agreement. Thus, they affirmed that they understood mutual deterrence to be the governing principle of the US-Soviet strategic relationship. And they recognized officially for the first time the interrelationship between offensive and defensive strategic systems and acknowledged that defensive, as well as offensive, systems can pose a threat to stability.

4. Generally, on broad concepts underlying the problems at issue the Soviets demonstrated sophistication; this was apparently intended to show their seriousness as well as to assert their claim to equality. Insofar as the Soviet statements approached more concrete issues, they reflected primarily a concern to lay the groundwork, at least for bargaining purposes, for definitions which would include or exclude weapon systems to the Soviet advantage. But it did not appear that the Soviets had even in their own minds a fully coherent view of the various elements which might go into an eventual agreement, and some of their points were made as a response to an illustrative negotiating outline offered by the US.

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5. Moscow's willingness to move on to a second round of talks indicates that it found US motives in SALT to be sufficiently "serious." No doubt some in the Soviet leadership were already persuaded of this, but others probably argued that the results of Helsinki should be awaited. In any case, it appears that Moscow was uncertain until the discussions were nearly ended whether they had gone well enough to warrant the conclusion that a second phase would have reasonable chances of success from the Soviet point of view. The decision to go ahead only after a four-month interval may have been due to foot-dragging by some elements in Moscow, though it could equally have resulted from recognition that much more elaborate preparation would be needed than had been thought.

6. Probably the Soviets left Helsinki without a clear understanding of the shape and content of an agreement at which the US might be aiming. That the US presented categories and definitions which the Soviets took to be self-serving presumably did not disturb them greatly, though they probably came away uncertain as to how flexible the US would be in this regard. Some features of the US presentation may have genuinely puzzled them, notably the tentative approach to the ABM problem and the mention of MIRV only in passing, as part of a list of component parts of missile

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systems. They may still be uncertain concerning the degree to which the "illustrative elements" outlined to them actually represented an initial US negotiating position. They are also probably confused concerning the extent to which the US intends to press for qualitative as well as quantitative limitations.

7. In particular, the Soviets are probably uncertain as to how comprehensive and complex an agreement the US will eventually seek. Even in a fairly simple agreement, the standards of equivalence will be difficult to establish, due to asymmetries in the structure of strategic forces -- a fact that both sides acknowledged at Helsinki. And the Soviets are probably not sure whether the US will be satisfied to rely for verification on national means only. Nevertheless, they have probably concluded tentatively that the US approach did not disclose any insuperable obstacles to an eventual agreement and that the chances of working out an agreement satisfactory to the USSR were good enough to be worth pursuing further.

Factors Bearing on Soviet Negotiating Tactics

8. The Helsinki round was altogether too preliminary and tentative to have clarified Soviet motives in entering SALT.



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Nevertheless, it strongly suggests that Moscow is seriously interested in discovering whether the intensity of the strategic arms competition can be contained, through SALT, on terms which do not prejudice Soviet security. The USSR's interest in exploring this avenue seems to rest, in the first place, on its perception of the present state of the strategic relationship with the US. Economic considerations also bear on the Soviet attitude toward SALT, as do certain Soviet foreign policy concerns, e.g., Western Europe, NATO, and China. But, at the same time, there are a number of factors which set limits to how far and how fast Moscow will go in SALT.

9. The Strategic Relationship with the US. We have no way of knowing with certainty whether the Soviet leaders believe that the present strategic relationship is the best they can now hope for and, if they do, whether they also think that long-term stabilization of this relationship is desirable or even possible. It may be that the decision-making apparatus in Moscow has not come to a firm consensus on such questions. There is agreement in Moscow, of course, that the USSR must have rough parity at least. It is possible that some Soviet leaders believe that a useful margin of advantage in strategic weaponry is attainable. We do think, however,

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that as the Soviet leaders now see the future they believe that it will not be feasible to attain superiority of a clear and decisive nature.<sup>1/</sup> They may fear, in fact, that the technical and economic capabilities of the US will enable it to reduce the USSR's relative position once again.

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<sup>1/</sup> Maj. Gen. Rockly Triantafellu, the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, disagrees with the assessment in this sentence. He believes as follows:

While the Soviets are sensitive to the possibility of the US embarking on an expanded strategic military program (including MIRVs, hardening, mobility, and ABMs), they are also sensitive to the mood of the US toward decreasing military expenditures. A judgment as to whether the Soviets would consider feasible the attainment of clear and decisive superiority must be addressed in the context of past Soviet decisions. The Soviets mounted an enormous effort to develop and deploy strategic nuclear systems (ICBMs, SLBMs, aircraft, and ABMs) to overtake the US in numbers and weapon yield and to achieve an initial advantage in AEM capability. While the decision to catch up posed a severe technological and economic challenge to the Soviets, they accepted the challenge and have now achieved at least parity. At the same time, they have continued to greatly expand their military research programs, have continued to develop new systems -- such as fractional orbit and depressed trajectory missiles -- and have continued the pace of their deployment of strategic systems. Therefore, in reviewing past Soviet achievements and weighing their present and future actions, there is no evidence to support a view that the Soviets will ignore an opportunity to forge ahead. The goal may now seem to them closer at hand than it was 10 years ago. The resources in terms of technical and scientific personnel, production capacity, and internal political control are available to motivate and facilitate a Soviet decision to achieve clear and decisive strategic superiority.

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10. If these are the views the Soviets entertain about the present situation, they may see value in an agreement which would stabilize the present situation. They might want such an agreement in a form which would not foreclose their options if and when they came to a different view of what the strategic relationship might be. They would be realistic enough to recognize, however, that an agreement loose enough to permit them some future freedom of choice would also give the same to the US.

11. Economic Considerations. At a time when the rate of industrial growth is declining, when the agricultural sector remains in parlous condition, and when it is openly acknowledged that the Soviet economy is lagging behind technologically, the Soviet leadership must be reluctant to face the prospect of additional heavy arms expenditures. Any easing of the strategic arms burden would make possible the redistribution of scarce investment funds and high-quality human resources. On those grounds, some Soviet leaders probably wish SALT well. Others would probably welcome the opportunity to shift resources within the military establishment itself. Nevertheless, given its present size, nature, and rate of growth, the Soviet economy could, if need be, support even higher levels of arms spending than at present. Though probably an important

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consideration, the state of the Soviet economy will not be the decisive factor in the Soviet approach to SALT. It does not oblige the USSR to seek agreement.

12. SALT and Current Soviet Foreign Policies. While its assessment of SALT's impact on the US-Soviet strategic relationship is paramount in Soviet thinking, Moscow must also realize that SALT is now involved in the total context of its foreign policy, and particularly its relations with the US. If a failure in SALT were to be added to differences over Vietnam and the Middle East, relations between the two great powers would tend to deteriorate. Such a trend at present would probably cause the USSR considerable concern. The USSR's current European diplomacy, which aims at generating an atmosphere of detente, would suffer a setback. Moreover, the Russians could expect the Chinese, seeing the failure of the US-Soviet enterprise and foreseeing the possibility of further overtures toward themselves from the US, to adopt a more uncompromising line toward Moscow. On the other hand, the Soviets could calculate that, if SALT were to show signs of progress, certain issues in US-USSR relations might become more manageable from their point of view.

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13. Taken together, considerations of this kind do give Moscow incentives for taking a positive approach to SALT, at least initially. On the other hand, the Soviets will not wish the US to believe that it has leverage in SALT because of the USSR's broader policy concerns, and they will not, in fact, make important concessions because of such concerns. Actually, they will hope that as SALT develops they will have opportunities to exploit weaknesses and divisions in the US and between the US and its allies. They are likely to exercise restraint in this respect, however, so long as they think they have a good chance of getting a satisfactory agreement.

14. Domestic Politics. The deliberations which led up to Moscow's acceptance of the US proposal for SALT were long and probably hard. There is no reason to suppose that the decision to go ahead, so deliberately reached, is likely to be easily reversed. Most signs indicate, however, that the prevailing instinct in Moscow is to move into SALT slowly and carefully. The momentousness of the negotiations for the national security of the USSR, as for that of the US, inevitably impresses itself on the minds of the Soviet leadership. The intrinsic complexity of the issues involved and the lack of experience of negotiation in this

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sensitive area also make for a cautious approach. Decisions which might not come easily in any circumstances will, moreover, in this case be affected by the ungainliness of the Soviet decision-making process and the conservative reflexes of the collective leadership.

15. A Soviet official at Helsinki confirmed that control over the delegation's activities came, as might have been surmised, from the Politburo itself, through the foreign ministry machinery. This procedure will presumably be maintained through the Vienna phase. The Politburo's watchfulness is not surprising, given not only the inherent significance of the issues but also the possible domestic effects of the decisions to be made and their implications for relations among the top leaders. None of the decisions faced by the present governing committee have cut across so many bureaucratic interests. Though some of these interests will have a positive attitude toward SALT, many of them will have misgivings. Among the latter will be that part of the economic bureaucracy which has a vested interest in defense industry and its many allies in the party apparatus. And, of course, the Politburo will need to give weight to military views, toward which it has been generally attentive in recent years.

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16. Military Attitudes. A large part of the Soviet military establishment -- probably the bulk of it -- undoubtedly has serious reservations about strategic arms limitations. But some of the military leaders have long resisted the high priority given to strategic weapons at the expense of the traditional arms of service. In recent years, the militarization of the Sino-Soviet dispute has greatly enlarged requirements for general purpose forces. Moreover, some military writers see in the nuclear stalemate a need to improve capabilities for conventional warfare, especially in view of NATO's adoption of a strategy of "flexible response." An arms limitation agreement which freed resources to meet these requirements would surely be welcome in some military quarters. Thus, the political leadership will probably not receive uniform advice from the military establishment as the negotiations develop.

Possible Soviet Positions At Vienna

17. It is unlikely that the Soviets will come to Vienna with a fully formulated package for negotiation. They will probably think of the next stage as requiring a further and perhaps lengthy "feeling out" period. Their aim at the outset will be to make a more precise assessment of what is negotiable. They would probably prefer to await a coherent set of proposals from the US side,

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hoping that they can then bring these closer to their own positions. And the Soviet delegation itself will be unsure as to precisely what its superiors in Moscow will accept or reject.

18. When the negotiations reach the stage of concrete formulations, the Soviets are likely to indicate a preference for a limited, quantitative agreement affecting only the principal weapon systems, as opposed to a more comprehensive and complex one. This approach would be based on a fear that a too comprehensive agreement might involve disadvantages they could not anticipate or foreclose developments by which they might eventually improve their relative position. Further, they would expect that the more complex the agreement, the more the US would be disposed to press for modes of verification unacceptable to them. In any case, they probably regard a complex agreement as too difficult to negotiate.

19. When they first come to Vienna, however, the Soviet negotiators will probably not be completely clear as to what the categories and content of even a simple, quantitative agreement ought to be. Their uncertainty will relate in particular to what scale of deployment of ABM and MIRV the US is committed to and to what extent these programs are negotiable.



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20. ABMs. At Helsinki, the Russians showed much concern over this issue. They seemed to regard control of ABM deployment as a key to determining whether an early, limited agreement is negotiable. At Vienna, their probing in this area will undoubtedly be continued and probably intensified because of the US decision relating to Safeguard announced since Helsinki. Soviet interest in the ABM question probably rests not only on concern for the potentially destabilizing effect of any extended deployment but also on a fear that US technology could put it ahead in this field. The Soviets may be concerned as well about the cost of the effort they would feel obliged to make to compensate for any large-scale US deployment of an ABM system.

21. At Helsinki, the Soviets listed for consideration three possible levels of ABM deployment: zero, light, and heavy. Their apparent preference was for a light level of ABM defenses, but they did not rule out the zero level option, though obviously this would necessitate dismantling the Moscow system. They seemed to regard heavy ABM levels as the least acceptable. They pointed out that these would entail the "highest levels of both offensive and defensive strategic weapons," since each side would presumably wish to compensate for the defenses of the other by enhancing the

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capabilities of its own strategic systems in some way. They also noted, calling attention to similar US expressions of concern, that "the deployment by one side of an ABM system to a level which might give it confidence in the sufficiency of its invulnerability to a retaliatory strike might generate a temptation to use strategic offensive weapons against the other side."

22. It is not clear how the Soviets would define "light" ABM defenses in terms of the scale and coverage the two sides would be allowed to have. Their reference to the danger of third-country attack suggests that they might want the system to have a significant capability against such attack, but they did not make clear how widely-deployed a system they would want for this purpose. They may have in mind a system defending only the national capitals and possibly a few additional command centers.

23. It seems clear, in any case, that the Soviets will argue strongly at Vienna against arrangements which permit deployment by the US of a countrywide ABM system -- even a thin one. They will register their concern that by moving into the second phase of Safeguard deployment the US could be laying the foundations for a heavy, nationwide system intended to defend its population against large-scale attack, and will argue that this would be destabilizing

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to mutual deterrence. They may indicate that if ABM deployment is held to a relatively low level, they might be prepared, in return, to hold deployment of their offensive systems, especially SS-9, to levels at which these would not be a serious threat to the US land-based retaliatory capability. We think that an attempt to probe US intentions concerning ABMs will be an immediate Soviet objective at Vienna, and that Moscow's conclusions on this score will bear heavily on its positions on other issues.

24. MIRVs. Clearly the Soviets recognize the linkage between ABM and MIRV. Their failure officially to broach the MIRV question at Helsinki and their privately expressed interest in having the US do so may have represented no more than their customary caution in approaching critical issues. They must believe, however, that the US is ahead in MIRV development and must fear that an agreement could trap them into a situation in which the US was in a position to deploy and they were not. At present, they evidently believe that MIRV deployment, and perhaps even testing, cannot be monitored by any means of verification they could accept. On the other hand, they face the dilemma that, if MIRVs are not controlled, they could find themselves at some disadvantage, at least for a time.

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25. If the Soviets do not see any way to bring MIRVs directly under an agreement, they may well argue at Vienna that the requirement for MIRVs is dependent on the level of ABM deployment and that the control of these linked systems can best be approached from the ABM side. They could argue that, if the ABM were held to a low limit and the number of ICBMs suitably limited to reduce each side's counterforce potential, the deployment of MIRVs would add little or nothing to each side's security; hence, there would be so little incentive to deploy them that a declaratory, i.e., uninspected, ban on MIRV deployment would suffice. In any case, it seems altogether unlikely that they would change their position on verification in order to allow inspection of MIRV deployment.

26. Throw Weight and Accuracy. Limitations pertaining to elements such as the throw weight and accuracy of missiles are unlikely to appeal to the Soviets. They would not want to be asked for concessions to compensate for the size of the SS-9 warhead, and, in any case, they would believe that approaches of this kind would present impossible problems of verification. They may not reject outright a US attempt to develop such approaches, but in the end they would probably find them too complex and uncertain to be negotiable at this time.

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27. Verification. The Soviets have accepted the principle that there must be adequate means of assuring both sides of compliance, but have once again asserted that national means should suffice to monitor an arms limitation agreement. The Soviets probably are not sure that the US will be satisfied to rely on national means only. They would expect that the more complex the agreement, the more the US would be disposed to press for modes of verification unacceptable to them. It is not clear what the Soviets include in national means, or how they rate their own capabilities. It is likely, however, in view of dissimilarities in national means of verification, that measures which the US considers could be verified by national means would not appear in this light to the Soviets, and vice versa.

28. Although specific cooperative measures were not actually discussed at Helsinki, the Soviet attitude suggested that Moscow might be willing to consider some fairly simple measures that would increase the effectiveness of national means of collection (examples might be: tests only at agreed missile ranges or an agreement to prohibit the use of cover for certain weapon systems). In addition, the Soviets seem well disposed to the idea of supporting an agreement by continuous consultation which might, among other

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things, gradually lead to progress in developing new modes of verification.

29. Combinations of Force Elements to be Limited. The Soviets recognize that there are -- and, for geographic and other reasons, are bound to be -- asymmetries between the US strategic forces and theirs. The idea of allowing the two sides to have different combinations of forces under agreed ceilings and to vary them over time does not seem to cause them any trouble in principle. But they will obviously be very sticky when it comes to agreeing on an initial combination for the two sides, and perhaps even more so in agreeing on what construction can be completed or what improvements and replacements are permissible within an agreed total. On this subject, the Soviets will probably not have firm proposals but will leave it to the US to take the lead.

30. IREM/MREMs, SLCMs, and Air Defense Systems. We see little chance that the Russians will alter the position that they took at Helsinki, namely that IREM/MREMs pose no threat to the security of the US but are an essential part of the USSR's defenses against third countries. They will continue to argue that US forward-based aircraft represent a more pertinent issue. They will probably contend that available means of detection give the US reasonable

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assurance against the possibility that IRBMs might be converted into ICBMs. The Russians will attempt to discover whether the US is willing to concede any of these points. If not, they may attempt to discover what US thinking is on alternatives, e.g., a trade-off which would exclude both IRBMs/MRBMs and forward-based aircraft from an initial agreement. With regard to SLCMs, the Soviets opposed their inclusion among strategic systems. We believe, however, that they would be willing to consider some trade-off here as well. We think it unlikely that they will agree to the inclusion of air defense systems, whether or not the US is willing to include its heavy bombers, and they are almost certain to continue in their refusal to discuss SAMs in an ABM context.

31. Other Subjects. A variety of additional issues were raised by the Russians at Helsinki. Among these were: measures to guard against accidental or unauthorized firing of nuclear weapons, or to deal with attack by a third party designed to provoke the USSR and US into conflict; prohibition on the transfer of strategic delivery vehicles and related technology to third parties; limitations on the operational spheres of nuclear-capable aircraft and submarines. The last of these has the earmarks of a mere bargaining point; although it is sure to be raised again at Vienna, the Russians are unlikely to press it, especially if

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prospects for progress in other areas seem reasonably good. They are likely, however, to press the subject of transfer with considerable vigor, in part because they may be concerned about the acquisition of ABM defenses by US allies. In connection with third-party attack, they may have in mind such things as additional "hot line" communications between the US and USSR, or even explicit understandings as to how to handle such a situation.

32. Whatever the course of discussions on these questions, the Soviets evidently see some value in preserving the forum which SALT provides for exchanges on a broad range of matters relating to the Soviet-American strategic relationship. They seem, moreover, to recognize that continuing talks might be useful to facilitate the execution and perhaps the eventual expansion of any SALT agreement.

33. Concluding Observations. Given the distances that will separate the two sides on most of the above key issues and the complexities that will need to be overcome, the Soviets have almost certainly not yet decided whether, in the end, an agreement acceptable to them can be achieved. Nor is there a single view in Moscow at present as to whether Soviet long-term interests would be better served by stabilizing the strategic relationship under an agreement



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rather than by continuing a competitive situation. The play of group interest and personal ambition which will surround this choice is bound to be intense.

34. Clearly there is much in the traditional Soviet outlook which would generate negative attitudes toward the idea of agreed stabilization. Long-held premises about the inevitability of conflict, mistrust of American motives, fear of being duped, even ignorance of the relevant technical facts would help to sustain such attitudes. And it is true that conservative instincts seem to be dominant in the present leadership.

35. On the other hand, there are obviously a number of people, including some military men, who have the ear of the leadership and will be able to make a strong case for a serious try at stabilization by agreement. The argument for easing economic pressures is a strong one, particularly for those who want more margin to experiment with economic reform. It will be said that as the arms race enters a new technological phase Soviet chances of lagging seriously behind are high. Some will argue that at present levels of strength strategic weapons are no longer as critical to the power competition, that, in fact, if the strategic arms race can be contained by agreement, other factors, including

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conventional military power, could be enhanced and would better serve the security and ambitions of the USSR.

36. We see no way of forecasting how such arguments will net out. Obviously the concrete choices presented by the interaction of the two sides in negotiations will be more determining than arguments made in the abstract. We would judge, however, that at present the Soviet leaders have a consensus, perhaps a shaky one, that the option of strategic stabilization by agreement should be given a long, hard look through SALT.

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