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THE NUCLEAR FREEZE: MYTHS AND REALITIES

INTRODUCTION

They were rebuffed last year, but advocates of a "nuclear freeze" are again seeking congressional endorsement of their particular scheme for nuclear arms reductions. The freeze approach, which calls for an immediate freeze on the production, testing and deployment of all nuclear weapons,¹ however, would create serious problems for U.S. strategic and political interests and would not achieve the professed goal of its backers--a lower probability of nuclear war. In fact, a freeze could well increase strategic instability and thus reinforce the morally questionable Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) approach of using civilian populations as hostages in the superpower rivalry.

Compliance with an immediate nuclear freeze would not be verifiable in key respects; in any case, true Soviet compliance is doubtful. More important, a freeze now would lock into place significant U.S. military inferiorities of a kind that erode the foundation of deterrence. A further unraveling of the Western alliance and a general diminution of U.S. political influence worldwide would then almost inevitably result.

The freeze approach rests upon a variety of assumptions and assertions. Implicit assumptions constitute the hidden agenda of the freeze program. Among them: that an immediate freeze would

¹ Freeze resolutions introduced in the 98th Congress include H.J. Res. 2 and 13, and S.J. Res. 2 and 163. For a fuller discussion of the various resolutions offered by the freeze movement, as well as a discussion of some of the issues raised here, see Jeffrey G. Barlow, "The Hard Facts the Nuclear Freeze Ignores," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 225, November 3, 1982.

make nuclear conflict less probable; that the Soviets are motivated by the same perceptions of war as the U.S.; and that a unilateral freeze is better than none at all. All of these assumptions are subject to question. Some clearly indicate that the theories rationalizing the freeze did not arise out of the freeze movement, itself, but are based upon some longstanding and highly disputable notions about nuclear policy.

IMMEDIATE BALANCED FREEZE CANNOT BE ACHIEVED

Responsible sectors of the nuclear freeze campaign stress that they support a bilateral freeze. Presumably, assured compliance by the Soviets is included in this requirement. If there is no assured verification, then the freeze not only would be worthless, but harmful to U.S. security interests.

Comprehensive verification of Soviet observance is highly unlikely.² The only method of really assuring compliance (and even this would be subject to evasion in certain instances) would be on-site inspection. Yet the Soviets consistently and resolutely have balked at such inspections. At the same time, Moscow, unlike the U.S., has frequently encrypted ICBM telemetry, which makes verification of the key arms control provisions very difficult, if not impossible. There is no reason to believe that the Soviets would allow adequate on-site inspection in the case of a freeze agreement. With the advancements in weapon miniaturization and disguise achieved in the past half-decade, it is no longer possible to rely on spy satellites to check on and detect violations of a nuclear freeze.³

Freeze advocates sometimes argue that any violation of real significance could be detected. But Reagan Administration concerns about the Threshold Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Treaty on Peaceful Nuclear Explosions reinforce doubts on this matter. According to the Administration, the U.S. cannot now distinguish with certainty a 300 kiloton explosion from a 150 kiloton blast (smaller tests might not be detected at all, but they could have significance for improvements in tactical nuclear weapons). This is important because the larger explosion is much more of a potential hard target weapon. Past experience has shown that once an agreement on arms has been reached, there are many both in and out of government who will strain to give the Soviets the benefit of the doubt regarding the significance of violations, and this would undoubtedly be the case with a freeze as well.

² For general discussion of verification problems, see "The Problem of Verification in the SALT"; quoted in Amrom H. Katz, Verification and SALT: The State of the Art and the Art of the State (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1979).

³ Leon V. Sigal, generally sympathetic to the freeze, has stated that "given present technology, it is impossible to monitor confidently what either side produces on its assembly lines." "Warming to the Freeze," Foreign Policy, Fall 1982, p. 55.

Research and development presents a truly difficult problem. Such R&D could potentially lead to qualitative breakthroughs which could give the Soviets new and increased advantages in the already lopsided strategic balance. While the Soviets, given their past record, probably would stress R&D even more after a freeze took effect, political pressure in the U.S. probably would force a shift in funds to domestic programs.

To achieve an acceptable degree of verification, if this were possible, would require lengthy negotiations. It could not be done immediately because of the complexity of the issues of definition and verification. The freeze proposal thus founders on the shoals of verification issues.

Integrally related to the question of verification is the matter of compliance with a freeze. Congressional oversight, the free press and the open American society would guarantee that the U.S. would faithfully observe both the letter and the spirit of any agreement. On the other hand, the record indicates a strong Soviet tendency to evade, stretch the meaning of, or violate treaties. For example, as recently as February 8, Moscow apparently tested a new light ICBM, the PL-5, in violation of the SALT II provisions.⁴ The Soviets themselves announced a supposed "freeze" on the deployment of the SS-20 in March 1982; yet, the Soviets have deployed at least forty additional SS-20s since that time. At the least, this suggests that the Soviets do not share the commonly accepted definition of a "freeze." Probable Soviet violations of the Biological Weapons Treaty are another example. The State Department has amassed irrefutable evidence that the Soviets have been (and still are) violating the Geneva Protocol of 1925 and the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention by using chemical warfare in Afghanistan and, through their satellites, in Laos and Cambodia.

The broad parameters of the proposed freeze agreement would allow the maximum opportunity for Soviet non-compliance. The U.S. would observe the supposed prohibitions strictly, while the Soviets would stretch interpretation of the freeze beyond recognition. In its sweeping scope, indeed, the freeze approach parallels the Biological Weapons Treaty negotiated in 1972, which has been massively violated by the Soviets.⁵

⁴ See: "Soviets Test New Missile, Possibly Violating SALT Terms," Washington Post, February 16, 1983, p. A20; "U.S. Says Russians Successfully Tested A New Type of ICBM," New York Times, February 16, 1983, p. A19. For further discussion of Soviet treaty violations, see "Soviet Violations of Arms Agreements," National Security Record #45, May 1982; and Jake Garn, "The Suppression of Information Concerning Soviet SALT Violations by the U.S. Government," Policy Review, Summer 1979, pp. 11-32; and a variety of articles and monographs by former CIA analyst David S. Sullivan, including his Soviet SALT Deception (Washington, D.C.: Coalition for Peace Through Strength, December 1979).

⁵ See especially Article IV of the Convention on the Prohibition of The Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction.

STRATEGIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

U.S.-Soviet Balance

Deterrence ultimately would become ever less credible under a freeze because the Soviets currently enjoy crucial strategic advantages over the U.S.--especially within the context of the plausible scenario of a Soviet first strike.⁶ Not only could the Soviets substantially destroy American land-based missiles (as well as many aircraft and submarines in port), but they would also retain a military advantage even after launching such a first strike.

The freeze would also lock in other U.S. inferiorities. For example, while the U.S. would have to make do with the quarter-century old B-52 bomber, the Soviets could continue to upgrade their air defense capability. Since the B-52 would soon become ineffective in its primary strategic role (the use of the B-52 as a carrier of cruise missiles could not be implemented) as a penetrator of Soviet territory, the de facto result would be the conversion of the U.S. strategic capability from a triad to a dyad.

While it is true that the current U.S. strategic submarine capability is substantial, it would be threatened by a freeze. By reducing the bomber and air-launched cruise missile threat to the Soviets, the freeze would leave the Soviets free to shift substantial resources into anti-submarine warfare. Even former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown is "not sure" that U.S. submarines will remain invulnerable, and has said that their survivability into the 1990s is an "open question."

The longer-term balance is also called into question by an immediate freeze. U.S. forces are aging (some 90 percent of U.S. warheads are on weapons over fifteen years old), only half of Soviet forces were produced before 1975. As a result, the Soviet arsenal is more likely to be effective, to have greater capabilities, and to remain truly credible longer than the U.S. arsenal. Since 1972, the Soviets have deployed ten variants of three new ICBMs; the U.S. has not deployed a new ICBM in seventeen years.

⁶ For one analysis based entirely on open source material, see Measures and Trends US and USSR Strategic Force Effectiveness, Interim Report for Period May 1977-March 1978 Prepared for Director, Defense Nuclear Agency (Alexandria, Virginia: Santa Fe Corporation, March 1978). This report summarized the situation in this way: "For the general period covered by this report (1960-1982), most of the measures show a shift from a clear US advantage to a Soviet advantage....The only measure of the 41 contained in this report in which the United States will apparently maintain a clear advantage is in (1) numbers of intercontinental bombers and (2) independently targetable Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) warheads."

The U.S. submarine force is only beginning to be modernized after a fifteen-year lapse, while the Soviets have two recently deployed submarine types. The Soviets have the new Backfire bomber, while the U.S. relies on the B-52. A freeze, in short, would come at the end of a ten-year period in which, as former Secretary of Defense Brown put it: "we built and the Soviets built; we stopped and the Soviets built."

European Balance

At present, the European conventional balance tilts dangerously against the Western alliance. Until recently, this was counter-balanced by a U.S. local nuclear superiority. Now the Soviets have the atomic advantage as well.

An immediate freeze would clearly prevent the deployment of any or all new U.S. Pershing II missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) in Europe. The freeze would, therefore, perpetuate an imbalance which allows the Soviets at least 340 SS-20s in Europe (the freeze would not prohibit redeployment, so the SS-20s now in Asia could be moved to further threaten Europe), while the U.S. would have no land-based equivalent. Additionally, the Soviets have moved ahead in the important area of shorter-range tactical nuclear weapons as well.

The political implications of an immediate freeze are alarming. There is a growing worldwide perception that the nuclear balance has been changing in favor of Moscow. The Soviets understand this and it is surely one reason for their growing international boldness.

An immediate freeze would signal to the Soviets, America's allies, and others that the U.S. does not intend to redress the imbalances created by the massive Soviet buildup of the past decade. West Europeans' doubts about U.S. intentions are already one of the principal reasons for the growing pacifist/neutralist/anti-alliance sentiment. This could well tempt the Soviets to exploit Allied weakness and uncertainty, thus making superpower conflict more, rather than less, likely, were a freeze in effect.

FREEZE ASSUMPTIONS

What assumptions do freeze advocates make about nuclear policy and related issues? Some of these assumptions are rather explicit in the literature of the freeze movement; others form a kind of hidden agenda of the movement.⁷ Among the explicit assumptions:

⁷ Many of these assumptions were discussed during hearings before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on February 17, 1983.

Immediate Freeze Would Make Nuclear Conflict Less Probable

There is an urgency about the freeze movement. An immediate freeze is demanded, on the argument that any further development or deployment of weapons will make the world a substantially more dangerous place. Facts do not support this assertion. New nuclear arms production and deployment by the U.S. will eventually restore a balance which has been destroyed by Soviet action.

The deployment of a new, survivable American land-based missile would strengthen stability and lessen the likelihood of war by reducing the Soviet incentive to press for geopolitical advantages or to strike first in a crisis situation. A new manned bomber would assure an alternative option to a massive strike by the U.S. and would allow for gradation between massive response and no reaction. A new submarine will provide better survivability for the sea leg of the system by allowing launching from considerably greater distances away, thus rendering the submarines less susceptible to attack.⁸ Deployment of the Pershing IIs and ground-launched cruise missiles will again only reestablish a balance violated by the massive Soviet deployment of SS-20s. Without the resource of these intermediate weapons, likelihood of escalation to all-out strategic nuclear war would be greater. Although usually ignored by freeze advocates, the fact is that as the U.S. deploys newer systems, it retires older systems. The numbers of nuclear weapons in U.S. possession, as well as total megatonnage, are being reduced.

A Nuclear Freeze is "The" Moral Approach

Self-righteousness and assumed moral superiority are trademarks of at least parts of the freeze movement. One group, for instance, calls itself "Citizens Against Nuclear War," as if those opposed to them are somehow for nuclear war. Yet non-freeze options for nuclear policy may be more moral than the freeze.

Is it more moral, or even moral at all, to accept, as freeze advocates do, the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction, which is that, in the event of a nuclear conflict, massive destruction of the innocent civilian population cannot be avoided? Is this position particularly moral, especially when compared to alternative policies which could develop weapons even more narrow in their destructive capabilities and weapons of defense (many non-nuclear) which could actually protect substantial portions of the populace from nuclear destruction?

Is it particularly moral to oppose anti-missile and civil defense efforts when such efforts are specifically designed to assure the safety of the civilian populace?

⁸ Richard Halloran, "Reagan Expanding Trident Program," New York Times, February 6, 1983, p. 18.

Is it particularly moral to oppose a capable bomber force, when bombers give U.S. retaliatory force precisely the flexibility to choose between total response and none at all? These bombers, for instance, are capable of being recalled, something impossible for a missile.

The only strategic theory which can make even a minimal justification for the argument that U.S. security would not be seriously damaged by an immediate freeze is the MAD theory. Ironically, therefore, the presumptive "moral" position on nuclear policy must justify itself by utilizing the theory that accepts mass civilian casualties if deterrence breaks down. This "moral" position adamantly rejects approaches designed to focus on military, rather than civilian, targets.

Substantial Monies Could be Shifted to Social Programs

If money were not spent on nuclear weapons development, freeze advocates assert, it could be directed to non-military programs. While this is clear, its relevance is not. National security--the issue of survival itself--is not a matter of budgetary tradeoffs. As the New Republic's Leon Weiseltier observes, "A change in military policy can be justified only on military grounds...if the MX, or any other equally expensive weapons, can be shown to be essential to the country's security, the money should go to it."⁹

In fact, the share of the defense budget allocated to nuclear weapon-related expenditures now is under 10 percent. Furthermore, to freeze nuclear weapons and still provide for the nation's security would require substantial increases in conventional capability here and overseas. The freeze thus would lead to substantial increases of the Pentagon conventional budget.

Deterrence Works Under Present Strategic Balance

The U.S. deterrence posture has grown less credible as the overall balance has shifted in favor of the Soviets, and a freeze would maintain this situation. Deterrence does not mean that the U.S. on paper could destroy the Soviet Union with weapons it has; rather that the threat of U.S. retaliation for a Soviet nuclear first strike is sufficiently believable, and the amount of damage which could be done sufficiently worrisome, to deter such a Soviet attack. The problem is that under the current balance, it has become increasingly less believable that the U.S. would: 1) respond to a Soviet attack at all, because of the certain knowledge that the Soviets would still retain enough weapons to destroy the U.S. civilian population; or 2) be able to inflict sufficient damage to the Soviets to make the cost substantially more than any possible gain from an attack.

⁹ New Republic, January 10 and 17, 1983, p. 14.

What About "Overkill?"

The logic of this contention is that because the U.S. has many more weapons than it needs to destroy the Soviet Union, the relative advantages do not matter.¹⁰ To be sure, numbers of weapons are relevant, yet the decisive questions involve capabilities and likely scenarios during a conflict. Under these criteria, the U.S. lacks overkill capability. Of course, it is possible and worthwhile to achieve balanced U.S.-USSR forces at lower quantitative (and/or qualitative) levels, but this is precisely what the freeze will not do. What would be "frozen" would be a dangerous imbalance.

Freeze Now, Reduce Later is a Realistic Approach

Is arms control more likely if the U.S. freezes now and then seeks to negotiate such reductions, or if the U.S. rebuilds its forces while seeking such reductions? The freeze advocates reject the "bargaining chip" approach to arms control. Yet the bargaining chip approach, rather than the immediate freeze, is more likely to lead to real reduction.

The validity of the "bargaining chip" theory is rooted in the history of American-Soviet negotiations. Moscow did not agree to anti-ballistic missile limits until the U.S. was actually ready to deploy an ABM. The Soviets did not come to the table to bargain about intermediate range ballistic missiles until the NATO agreement to deploy the Pershing II and the ground-launched cruise missiles.

Of course, if the freeze would in fact rigidify a current imbalance favorable to the Soviets, then there is no incentive for the Soviets to agree to anything beyond the freeze which does not in fact retain the current balance. Rather, there would most likely be a replay of SALT I and II when the U.S. acquiesced to agreements which reflected U.S. inferiority in key weapons areas.

An "Immediate" Freeze is Attainable

Once freeze advocates try to detail exactly how they would implement a freeze, the complexity of the issue becomes clear--even from their own explanations. It probably would take at least as long, if not longer, to negotiate a balanced bilateral freeze than it would to agree to any other arms treaty. Thus one of the most basic rationales for a freeze--the urgency of an

¹⁰ One example of the overkill argument can be found in a January 1983 Council for a Liveable World publication dealing with the nuclear freeze: "The numbers and yields of nuclear weapons have little actual meaning because each side possesses far more than enough to destroy each other many times over."

immediate freeze--either would result in a totally unacceptable unilateral freeze or be subject to the same time constraints as any other arms negotiations.

The difficulty of arranging a freeze is acknowledged by Ground Zero leader Roger Molander: "It isn't going to be easy to get the Soviets to accept the intrusive inspection and cooperative measures necessary to verify a comprehensive freeze. In that sense you need to be careful not to oversell the freeze to the American people." Of course an immediate freeze is attainable were the U.S. unilaterally to declare and observe a freeze. This is the only way that a nuclear freeze is immediately achievable. If this is what freeze proponents really want and mean, they should say so.

Otherwise, the reality of the matter is that any bilateral freeze would have to be negotiated, both as to what specifically is and is not covered and as to how, specifically, it would be supposedly verified. But if long, detailed negotiations are to be pursued, why not aim at reducing rather than freezing nuclear arsenals at levels that both freeze proponents and opponents, for differing reasons, find objectionable?

One example of this "detail" problem: Submarines are excluded from the ban on new nuclear-related weapons. Why submarines should be excluded and not aircraft is not ever made clear (there is also a definitional problem for aircraft: which ones are "primarily" nuclear?). At the same time, much is made of the current U.S. edge in ability to detect Soviet submarines. But, if new generations of submarines are allowed under a freeze, then the edge here, which is offered as one reason that overall parity supposedly exists, could well disappear.

The Soviets are Motivated by the Same Perceptions as the U.S.

In its fundamental form, this implicit assumption of the freeze movement is the so-called mirror-image fallacy.¹¹ Of course, Soviet leaders do not actively seek or hope for a nuclear war. At the same time, it would be fallacious to assume that they have the same motivations and incentives as Western leaders do to achieve or observe an arms control agreement.

The history and political culture of the U.S. reinforce an optimistic view of international relations where tranquility, not conflict, should be the norm. For the Soviets, history and culture teach very different lessons, and make for a very tough-minded position. In addition, political pressure in democracies for peace or apparent peace have absolutely no equivalent in the Soviet sphere.

¹¹ See: Charles T. Baroch, "The Mirror-Image Fallacy: Understanding the Soviet Union," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 193, June 29, 1982.

A MAD Approach to Nuclear Policy is Best

The Mutual Assured Destruction theory of nuclear deterrence is the only one that really fits in with the freeze approach. The MAD doctrine, however, raises profound moral issues. At the same time, it also must be reexamined in the light of present and emerging technologies which could allow for more accurate targeting on military targets, rather than on civilians, and which also could allow the development of capabilities for protecting civilians. To the extent that MAD was a function of technology, the U.S. need not anymore be its prisoner; to the extent that it had a moral basis, this has been removed by the new technologies; and to the extent it was thought to assure deterrence, it clearly cannot do so under present circumstances.

Defensive Systems Are a Bad Idea

This is the logical corollary of the position described above. Systems which could actually defend people--such as anti-ballistic missiles, civil defense, or High Frontier-type approaches¹²--are dogmatically rejected because they would call into question the whole MAD theology, which is part and parcel of the freeze logic. At a minimum, any nuclear policy approach such as a freeze which must reject any consideration of ways to better protect people because, otherwise, its very raison d'etre would be removed, is subject to serious question.

Submarine Capability is All That We Really Need in a Crisis

The U.S. nuclear submarine capability is strong. To rely too much on it, however, creates several problems: 1) in a true surprise attack, roughly one-half of the submarines could be caught in port; 2) communications problems between command centers and the submarines would exist after a first strike, which raise doubts about their true utility; 3) as freeze advocates themselves state, present capabilities mean that the real utility of a submarine force would be a mass destruction of Soviet cities and citizens, and there are real doubts as to whether the U.S. should or would respond in this manner; 4) anti-submarine capabilities of the Soviets could well improve significantly under a freeze.

War-Fighting Capability is Objectionable

What war-fighting capability means is that if a nuclear conflict actually develops, the U.S. would have the ability to lessen the potential destruction of the U.S. and its populace as well as effectively deal with Soviet military targets.

¹² See: Lt. Gen. Daniel O. Graham, USA (Ret.), High Frontier: A New National Strategy (Washington, D.C.: High Frontier, Inc., 1982).

Freeze proponents suggest the process of thinking about such matters and planning and deploying for them, makes their likelihood of happening greater. In reality, developing a war-fighting capability is a necessary ingredient of deterrence. Unless the U.S. has a real war-fighting capability, deterrence will not be credible. Nor would the U.S. be able actually to have the capability to achieve its objectives or calibrate its response, if appropriate, should conflict occur.

The U.S. Is As Much a Problem as the Soviets on Arms Control

Some parts of the freeze movement view the U.S. and the Soviets as equally reprehensible. Both nations possess an awesome destructive capability, goes this argument; ergo, both are at fault for raising the fear of a nuclear disaster. Under this logic, as long as there is some reduction, somewhere, by some side, the cause of peace will have gained.

The logic of the freeze in a certain sense necessitates an active apology for the Soviet Union and its intentions. Some freeze advocates even vigorously defend the Soviet arms control record,¹³ something which the historical record condemns as indefensible.

A Unilateral Freeze is Better Than None At All

Some segments of the freeze movement are moving dangerously close to unilateral freezing, which is only a step removed from unilateral reductions and then disarmament. In their desperate urgency for a freeze, at least some of the freeze supporters are apparently willing to forego even the pretence of bilateralism. The recent St. Louis convention signified support for cutting off funding for the testing, production and deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons; no preconditions for Soviet participation or even rhetorical concurrence were required, only that the U.S. "call upon the Soviet Union to exercise corresponding restraint." In fact, the convention specifically defeated a motion requiring that a U.S. freeze be contingent upon a Soviet response to the U.S. request. With respect to the theater nuclear issue, the convention opposed any deployment of U.S. weapons while calling only for "substantial reductions" in Soviet TNF weaponry.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Idealism often inspires noble sentiments. Certainly, the belief that the threat of nuclear devastation is not the best way

¹³ See for example two papers issued by the Connecticut Freeze Campaign: "The Soviets and the Freeze" and "History of Soviet Compliance with Nuclear Arms Control Treaties."

¹⁴ Judith Miller, "Nuclear Freeze Group Plots a More Political Approach," New York Times, February 7, 1983, p. A10.

to resolve problems or prevent war is an understandable and appealing manifestation of such idealism.

This becomes a problem, however, when such idealism refuses to examine the facts relating to nuclear policy. Freeze advocates have allowed their concern about, or fear of, nuclear war to lead them to advocate a policy which would damage U.S. security, which raises serious moral questions, and which is based upon numerous doubtful assumptions.

It is one thing, moreover, for freeze advocates to march and pressure for a freeze. It is another matter for the Congress to support this position. For the Congress or either House to endorse an immediate nuclear freeze would undercut attempts to negotiate a serious arms reduction treaty.

The freeze movement--in a sense--has proved useful in focusing public attention on important questions. It forces advocates of other positions to sharpen and refine their arguments. This was a positive benefit of the SALT II debate, which ultimately increased public support for defense preparations. Given the fact that a great majority of the U.S. public is opposed to a freeze that would result in any Soviet advantage,¹⁵ the challenge for freeze opponents is to make this fact clear and to offer viable alternatives for nuclear policy. The outcome of this clash of ideas will only be apparent after full congressional and public debate in the days ahead. If the SALT II debate is any indication, realism and good sense will prevail.

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¹⁵ For example, a CBS-New York Times poll of May 19, 1982, indicated 67 percent of the public would oppose a freeze that gave the Soviets a nuclear advantage. For more background, see Public Opinion, August/September 1982, pp. 33-40.