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SALT II: AT WHAT PRICE ?

INTRODUCTION

Next week, Ronald Reagan will submit a report to Congress on the future of the SALT II nuclear arms agreement. This report was due on June 1, and the delay reflects the considerable debate and controversy the issue has raised in the White House. What the President will say in his report not only will have impact on the current U.S.-Soviet arms talks and the fate of SALT II, but on U.S. security.

The congressional mandate to which the President is responding is contained in the Department of Defense Authorization Act of 1985, and states:

It is the sense of the Congress that...the President shall provide to Congress on or before June 1, 1985, a report that:

- (A) describes the implications of the United States Ship Alaska's sea trials...;
- (B) assesses possible Soviet political, military, and negotiating responses to the termination of the United States no-undercut policy;
- (C) reviews and assesses Soviet activities with respect to existing strategic offensive arms agreements; and
- (D) makes recommendations regarding the future of United States interim restraint policy;...

This report may well become the foundation of future U.S. arms control and strategic nuclear policy. Its most important

section will be its response to congressional mandate (D). This will signal whether Reagan plans to change the current U.S. policy of not undercutting the provisions of the unratified SALT II agreement. It will be difficult for him to urge continued U.S. compliance, however, so long as Moscow continues to violate key treaty provisions.

THE ISSUE

The 1979 SALT II agreement would have been due to expire at the end of this year had the accord been ratified by the U.S. Senate. It was not ratified because Senators of both parties were alarmed by the treaty's serious shortcomings. Among them were unilateral advantages conceded to Moscow and the near impossibility of the U.S. verifying Soviet compliance.¹

Although the treaty never became legally binding, it has been U.S. policy not to undercut its provisions "so long as the Soviet Union refrains from undercutting the provisions" as well, or until a new strategic offensive arms accord is concluded.² The Soviet government also pledged to observe the treaty. In fact, however, Moscow repeatedly has ignored key treaty provisions.

Soviet SALT II violations have been well documented in three reports submitted by President Reagan and other independent assessments of Soviet compliance.³ The violations include:

- a) encryption of missile telemetry to deliberately impede U.S. verification of Soviet compliance with other provisions of the treaty;
- b) testing of a second new type of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). SALT II limits both sides to one new type of ICBM. The Soviets designated the SS-24 as their new missile, but have also tested, and are about to deploy, the SS-25;
- c) production of the Backfire bomber in excess of 30 per annum, despite the pledge of the late Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev to hold production to that level;

¹ These were brought to light in the extensive congressional hearings during Senate consideration of the treaty. See also David Sullivan, Arms Control and U.S. Foreign Policy: Fatal Flaws of SALT II, Institute of American Relations, 1980.

² Department of Defense Authorization Act, 1985, Section 1110(b)(2).

³ See for example, "Soviet Treaty Violations and U.S. Compliance Policy," National Security Record No. 63, December 1983; Colin Gray, "Soviet Non-compliance with Arms Control Agreements: The Need for Courage in U.S. Policy," Congressional Record, October 28, 1983, pp. S14852-S14853; and David Sullivan, The Bitter Fruit of SALT: A Record of Soviet Duplicity, The Texas Policy Institute, 1982.

- d) deployment of the mobile SS-16 ICBM at Plesetsk in contravention of the protocol of SALT II;
- e) failure to dismantle launchers in excess of 2,250 by January 1, 1981, consistent with the timetable for gradual reductions to the aggregate ceiling on launchers. The Soviets still maintain over 2,500 launchers, compared to about 1,900 by the U.S.

Soviet undercutting of SALT II makes it imperative for the U.S. to reappraise its continued adherence to the treaty. There is no question that the U.S. has held itself to a much stricter standard of compliance than has Moscow. There has been a clear double standard in the no-undercut policies of both countries that has proved harmful to U.S. security by permitting Moscow to expand its nuclear superiority over the United States.

These SALT related concerns are intensified by the provisions of the treaty that will impose restrictions on U.S. strategic nuclear programs in the near future. Specifically, the U.S.S. Alaska, a Trident-class submarine carrying 24 multiple warhead ballistic missiles, is scheduled to begin its sea trials this September. To comply with SALT II provisions limiting multiple warhead missiles, the U.S. will have to decommission one Poseidon-class submarine with its 16 multiple warhead ballistic missiles when the Alaska goes to sea.⁴ Although the U.S. remains substantially below the overall limit on ballistic missile launchers, and well below Soviet levels, the U.S. thus will be forced to dismantle one of its most survivable strategic weapons systems to comply with the treaty. Operational deployment of the B-1B bomber, moreover and the conversion of additional B-52H bombers to air launched cruise missile platforms may conflict with the SALT II limits of 120 such systems.⁵

The December 31, 1985, expiration date for SALT II was set on the assumption that deep reductions in offensive strategic weapons would be negotiated during the treaty's life. SALT II's limited duration was meant to ensure that the treaty would not impede the strategic modernization necessary for U.S. security in the event that U.S.-Soviet talks failed to lead to the anticipated cuts in weapons.

Ronald Reagan faces a difficult decision and must balance the desire to maintain the existing arms control framework against the need to modify it to address more adequately U.S. compliance

⁴ The U.S. alternatively could dismantle other multiple warhead missiles, such as the Minuteman III, or other comparable units of account, such as air launched cruise missile (ACLM) carrying bombers, which are considered in the treaty to be the equivalent to multiple warhead missiles.

⁵ Based on the fact that the U.S. is reaching the 1,200 limit on multiple warhead missiles, SALT II restricts the U.S. to 120 ACLM bombers within the overall ceiling of 1,320 multiple warhead launchers.

and security worries. This need not be an either/or choice of outright withdrawal from or unqualified affirmation of SALT II. Options range from folding the best features of SALT II into the Geneva agenda, to selective compliance in light of Soviet violations, to reevaluation of the treaty premised on strict Soviet adherence. This last option would require Moscow to redress the effects of its past noncompliance to restore the integrity of the treaty, reinforce confidence in the arms control process, and assuage U.S. fears of Soviet military advantages derived from surreptitious exploitation of ambiguities in the treaty.

These objectives provide the yardstick by which to craft an appropriate and prudent U.S. policy towards adherence to the unratified SALT II treaty as its expiration date approaches. For any policy to be successful, it must garner political support, both at home and abroad, minimize Soviet political, military and bargaining leverage, and thus serve U.S. security interests. Few options can fully meet these criteria.

THE MENU OF CHOICES

Permit Treaty to Lapse

Many opponents of SALT II contend Soviet violations of the treaty provide irrefutable evidence that Moscow does not share U.S. arms control objectives. They further denounce SALT II as fatally flawed because of its inequities and ambiguities, failure to reduce nuclear arsenals, and essential unverifiability. They cite the treaty's growing inconsistency with U.S. strategic force requirements as determined by the bipartisan Scowcroft Commission. They are concerned, moreover, that the treaty will place crippling restrictions on U.S. nuclear weapons programs, such as the Midgetman, deployment of which (currently scheduled for the early 1990s) would be prohibited. Finally, they argue that expiration of the U.S. no-undercut policy will encourage the Soviets to realize that they cannot hope to exploit the arms control process to secure unilateral advantages. For these reasons, many experts are advising Reagan to allow SALT II to lapse as scheduled.

This option may entail considerable political and military costs. The integrity of the arms control process has become hostage to extraneous political considerations and, consequently, agreements are no longer evaluated on the basis of their intrinsic value and contribution to U.S. national security. Indeed, arms control in many ways has become a prerequisite to obtain political approval of new weapons programs. Example: the MX debate and controversy over intermediate range nuclear missile (INF) deployment in Europe. Permitting SALT II to lapse could contribute to the perception fostered by liberals that the Reagan Administration has "killed" arms control and fueled the arms race. If this spreads, it could undermine the political will in Europe needed to sustain continued INF deployment and further erode the already tenuous support in the U.S. for strategic force modernization.

Some reflexive supporters of Moscow and arms control actually contend that the U.S. must continue to comply with SALT II to prevent Moscow from doubling or tripling its strategic nuclear forces very rapidly. Since the U.S. is not capable of expanding its forces at the same rate, the strategic balance would thus tilt even further against the U.S. in the absence of SALT constraints. This reasoning presumes, however, that arms control has had a restraining effect on Moscow, a point which critics deny. It is also difficult to understand why the Soviets would want to expand their strategic forces so massively, if they indeed are as interested and dependent upon arms control as their U.S. apologists allege.

Continued Adherence

Many of the arguments for continued adherence are identical to those invoked by opponents of a U.S. decision to let the treaty lapse. They are anxious to preserve SALT II as a symbol of arms control and détente, much like the 1972 Anti-ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. They fear that termination of SALT II will convince the Kremlin that Washington is not negotiating in good faith. They contend that SALT II, despite apparent inequities favoring the Soviets, constitutes a bridge from SALT I to a future agreement which, at last, will deeply reduce offensive nuclear weapons. Without such a bridge, they argue, these deep reductions may be impossible to achieve. As such, a decision to allow SALT II to lapse amounts to a decision to scuttle arms control. Finally, proponents consider SALT II necessary for domestic political reassurance and cohesion among the Western nations required to negotiate effectively at Geneva.

Those urging the U.S. to withdraw from the treaty, however, explain that unqualified adherence beyond SALT II's defined lifetime would be tantamount to legitimizing and condoning Soviet failure to comply with the treaty and to accepting in perpetuity U.S. strategic nuclear inferiority. If SALT II was to have been a bridge to an agreement requiring deep reductions and the U.S. adhered to it for this reason only, then the expiration date is a natural juncture at which the U.S. should admit frankly that the treaty has failed to serve its purpose. SALT II was negotiated for a limited duration, moreover, so that if significant cuts were not achieved during its lifespan, the U.S. could develop and deploy the weapons to meet changes in the strategic environment.

Fold the Best SALT II Features into Geneva Talks

This option recognizes that SALT II contains some provisions conducive to maintaining stable deterrence. One such provision is the overall 2,250 ceiling on strategic launchers and the limits on warhead fractionation.⁶ By preserving this ceiling,

⁶ Fractionation refers to the practice of placing more than one warhead on a missile; the greater the fractionation, the more warheads on the missile.

the U.S. can press the Soviets at Geneva to reduce their strategic forces to the SALT II levels. Continuation of the SALT II restraints, meanwhile, could facilitate the Geneva negotiations by: 1) maintaining intact the key elements of the arms control framework; 2) curbing further expansion of Soviet strategic forces while negotiations proceed; 3) continuing U.S. compliance and pressing Moscow to begin doing so; and 4) mitigating the adverse political impact on the U.S. bargaining posture of allowing the treaty to lapse entirely.

This option, however, would complicate the Geneva agenda and requires reworking the U.S. negotiating strategy by adding negotiation of interim restraints to the already complex talks. By so doing, it could divert attention from the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) agenda, specifically its critical focus on warhead reduction. To make matters worse, interim restraints would be hostage to Soviet good faith bargaining, and thus there is no assurance that they can be achieved in a satisfactory manner. Despite the constructive aspects of this approach, the U.S. will be charged with self-serving hypocrisy and be held responsible for undermining the extant negotiations.

Selective Compliance

This could take two forms. In response to Soviet violation of specific SALT II provisions, the U.S. could declare that it is not bound by the provisions. Alternatively, the U.S. could retaliate by ignoring comparably significant provisions of its own choosing. Both forms of selective compliance could help enforce Soviet treaty adherence by demonstrating U.S. resolve to deny Moscow military advantages from its violations. By selecting the provisions it will ignore, the U.S. could maximize its leverage and deter Soviet future noncompliance. Such a policy also permits the U.S. to adjust its force posture to redress the effects of Soviet violations and correct the most damaging shortcomings of SALT II.

As a unilateral step by the U.S., this policy is not subject to a Soviet negotiating "veto," even though Moscow may depict U.S. retaliatory actions as unprovoked abrogation of SALT II and thus derive some propaganda windfall. This would feed the natural apprehensions of the Allies and domestic U.S. critics who seem eager to assail Reagan Administration defense policy, though perhaps less so than letting the treaty lapse entirely. In the process, the U.S. could risk sacrificing the moral high ground and, perhaps, some of the legal foundations of its charges of Soviet treaty violations. Such an approach may also lead to a rapid and uncontrolled disintegration of the arms control process.

Reconsideration of SALT II: Strict Soviet Compliance

Unlike unqualified U.S. continued compliance, which only feeds Soviet contempt for international agreements and the arms control process, this option would bar continued U.S. compliance

with SALT II beyond its expiration date unless Moscow demonstrates its strict compliance with all SALT II provisions. This approach:

- addresses U.S. concerns about Soviet treaty violations and requires Moscow to come into full compliance with SALT II as a precondition for U.S. consideration of continuing its no-undercut policy;
- enforces Soviet compliance with SALT II and thus demonstrates U.S. readiness to hold Moscow responsible for its treaty commitments;
- ends the double standard in the U.S. no-undercut policy by which the American arms control community holds the U.S. to stricter standards of compliance than it does Moscow;
- offers the prospect of retaining the current arms control framework, provided that Moscow ceases its most serious abuses, and the most grievous inequities will be corrected;
- places the responsibility for the future of SALT II and the arms control process clearly on Moscow. It will be Moscow's choice to honor existing agreements, thereby indicating willingness to restore the integrity of past agreements and the utility of arms control as a mechanism by which both sides can enhance their security; or, through its determination to reap unilateral advantage, render the existing arms control framework untenable;
- could force reductions in the Soviet strategic arsenal, preventing the Soviets from capitalizing on the momentum of their military build-up, if Moscow abides by SALT II;
- could hedge against a stalemate at Geneva, by preserving some vestige of the current arms control regime, however inadequate this might be;
- could limit Soviet testing of strategic defense counter-measures. Example: Moscow could not proliferate warheads on its heavy missiles in an effort to saturate a potential U.S. defense, without violating the treaty.

The option of trading U.S. SALT II compliance for strict Soviet compliance, however, comes with a high--perhaps too high--price tag. For one thing, it could require the U.S. to delay the sea trials of the U.S.S. Alaska until Soviet intentions become clear. Such a delay must last no later than the end of this year. This option would also enhance the public standing of SALT II and thus perpetuate its inequitable and unverifiable provisions which eventually will become militarily and politically intolerable. What is most troubling is that this option would reinforce the erroneous argument by idealistic arms control proponents that arms control can substitute for, rather than merely complement, military preparedness.

CONCLUSION

All the options open to the Administration entail some political costs and military drawbacks. This is a problem which Reagan has created for himself by having agreed four years ago not to undercut SALT II. It would have been wiser not to have done so. The legacy of that mistake limits his options today. He must choose one that best permits the U.S. to restore the nuclear balance while minimizing the political, military, and negotiating complications. Some options are clearly less constructive and are less responsive to legitimate U.S. concerns. Ultimately, the President must weigh their benefits and costs in terms of his long-term strategic goals for Soviet-American relations.

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