

A STRATEGY FOR U.S. SALT II COMPLIANCE

The SALT II strategic arms limitation agreement has never been ratified by the Senate and was denounced as "fatally flawed" by Ronald Reagan in his 1980 presidential campaign. Nonetheless, the U.S. voluntarily has been obeying the agreement--as if it were law. Had the agreement been ratified, it would expire the 31st of this month. This fast approaching deadline confronts Reagan with a crucial decision. Will he pledge to keep abiding by the unratified and expired agreement and to take no steps that would undercut any of its provisions--despite documented Soviet violations of SALT II? Or will he, as he is entitled, either let the agreement expire or take appropriate and proportionate responses to Soviet violations, while continuing to observe voluntarily other provisions of the agreement?

The question of compliance became an issue last June when Reagan made a conditional pledge not to undercut SALT II. The only condition was that the Soviet Union "exercise comparable restraint" in observing the pact. To comply with his pledge, the U.S. actually took a Poseidon nuclear submarine out of service in September for dismantling. It did so because the imminent deployment of a new Trident submarine would have pushed the number of U.S. multiwarhead ballistic missiles above the ceilings set by SALT II. Last June also, however, Reagan ordered the Pentagon to study what proportionate responses he could take to offset Soviet arms control violations.

So far, Moscow's compliance with SALT II has been dismal. The Soviet Union already exceeds by at least 250 the overall numerical ceiling of 2,250 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles allowed by the treaty. U.S. experts agree that the Soviet deployment of a new mobile intercontinental ballistic missile, the SS-25, also violates SALT II restrictions on fielding new types of strategic missiles. And Moscow's deliberate use of camouflage, concealment, and deception (including telemetry encryption and jamming of U.S. telemetry collection capabilities) to mask missile tests violates SALT II.

Despite these and other Soviet SALT II violations, the U.S. unilaterally and consistently has followed a "no undercut" policy. If it continues to do so after December 31, the Navy will have to dismantle two more Poseidon missile-launching submarines to make way for the missiles on the soon-to-be-deployed Trident USS Nevada. Further unconditional

compliance will require that the U.S. dismantle between 1,320 and 2,240 MIRVed (multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles) ballistic missile warheads by 1991. Were the Soviets to comply, they only would have to dismantle about 558 ballistic missiles, of which only 112 would be MIRVed systems.

For Reagan to continue complying unconditionally with all provisions of the agreement will give Moscow no incentive to comply; it probably would ensure new Soviet violations in the future. And it would make reaching a new, verifiable arms control agreement even more difficult than it is. The reason: it makes little sense to sign new nuclear arms agreements if Moscow violates the existing ones.

In making his decision whether to comply voluntarily with SALT II beyond its scheduled December 31 expiration, Ronald Reagan should use several guidelines. Among them:

1) The U.S. should require absolute symmetry from the Soviet Union in complying with all provisions of the treaty.

2) Since compliance has not been Soviet past practice, Reagan should not make an unconditional declaration extending U.S. compliance beyond December 31. Conditional compliance is possible, but only if the U.S. states first that it reserves the right, as it legally is entitled to do, to take appropriate, concrete, proportionate responses to Soviet SALT II violations. Initial recommendations, taken perhaps from the second part of the soon-to-be-completed Pentagon study of possible compensatory U.S. responses to Soviet violations, should be announced at the same time. These could include deployment of additional Minuteman III missiles, more B-1B strategic bombers, and acceleration and expansion of the Trident D-5 submarine ballistic missile program.

3) To monitor Soviet arms control compliance and to report violations, Reagan should establish an Arms Control Compliance Commission composed of advisors from the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and the President's General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament. It should advise the President on the national security implications of Soviet arms violations and recommend compensatory U.S. actions.

By abiding by an unratified agreement, the U.S. has demonstrated its good faith. The same should be asked of Moscow. It makes no sense for the U.S. to destroy perfectly good and very costly nuclear submarines, to the detriment of the U.S. strategic deterrent, in order to comply with an unratified and expired agreement so long as Moscow violates key provisions of that agreement. If there is to be U.S. compliance, it must be proportionate to Soviet compliance.

Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D.
Policy Analyst

For further information:

SALT II: Rest in Peace, Heritage Lecture Series No. 40, March 28, 1985.

Colin S. Gray, "Moscow is Cheating," Foreign Policy, Fall 1984.