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Evolution of the U.S. START Approach

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Following is an article by Richard Burt, Assistant Secretary-designate for European Affairs, which appeared in NATO Review, *Vol. 30, September 1982.*

The United States and the Soviet Union first began negotiations on the limitation of strategic nuclear forces in November 1969, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT). While this dialogue produced some modest accomplishments, the high hopes and expectations of the early 1970s were never realized. From the perspective of reducing the level of nuclear armaments and securing a stable nuclear balance, the SALT process proved a disappointment. Despite the efforts of three U.S. administrations, the growth of Soviet strategic forces during the 1970s was unprecedented.

The Reagan Administration came to office in January 1981 determined to do better: to negotiate balanced and verifiable arms control agreements that would actually reduce the levels of nuclear weapons on both sides and make a meaningful contribution to securing a stable nuclear balance. President Reagan immediately ordered an in-depth review of arms control policy, to examine the lessons of SALT and to explore alternative solutions to the problem of reducing strategic nuclear forces. Following completion of this review, the President decided to make a significant departure from the past course of U.S.-Soviet negotiations. In his May 9 speech at Eureka College, he announced the new U.S. approach. Rather than seeking an agreement which would do no more than codify and marginally influence the growth of strategic forces, the United States would make a proposal for substantial, equitable, and verifiable reductions.

On June 29, the United States and the Soviet Union opened the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) in Geneva. The U.S. delegation, led by Ambassador Edward Rowny, carried with it the proposal outlined by the President. This approach is bold yet realistic. Underlying it are the objectives of enhancing deterrence and securing a stable U.S.-Soviet nuclear balance at substantially lower levels of forces.

Background

The role of U.S. strategic forces is to deter attack against the United States or its allies and thereby maintain peace. To deter successfully, it is necessary to convince a potential aggressor that the risks and potential costs of his aggression far outweigh any gains he might hope to achieve. The strategic balance, therefore, is a crucial element in a potential aggressor's calculation of the relative benefits and costs of his action.

The strategic balance is based not merely on an assessment of numbers but on system capabilities, command, and control as well as force trends. In calculating the balance, it is also important to examine qualitative factors such as a particular system's survivability (or the reverse, its vulnerability to attack by the other side), and its ability to reach its target against potential defenses. Strategic forces which can survive a first strike and successfully retaliate against a broad range of targets are required for deterrence and stability.

The subject is complex, and specialists have varying views and interpretations of the current state of the strategic nuclear balance and the significance of particular measures of strategic power. However, all can agree on one essential fact: The combined effects of the shifts in the strategic balance over the past 15 years have favored the Soviet Union and have been to the disadvantage of the United States. In particular, the growing vulnerability of the U.S. land-based intercontinental missile force provides the Soviet Union a margin of superiority in this area.

In the mid-1960s—before the SALT dialogue was begun—the United States held unquestioned superiority in strategic nuclear forces. It was completing deployment of over 1,000 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and 41 nuclear submarines carrying 656 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). While the Soviet Union deployed a sizeable force of ICBMs, their numbers were fewer. Moreover, the Soviet Navy was only beginning to deploy modern ballistic missile-carrying submarines. In the category of heavy bombers, the U.S. B-52 force was numerically several times the size of its Bear/Bison counterpart and even more superior in terms of capability.

By mid-1972—when the SALT I agreements (the treaty limiting anti-ballistic missile systems and the interim agreement on strategic offensive arms) were signed—the Soviet Union had caught up with the United States in several indices of strategic capability and in the number of ballistic missiles had taken the lead, deploying some 2,000 as opposed to 1,700 for the United States. The United States still maintained a significant advantage in heavy bombers, though that lead had declined somewhat due to the retirement of older United States aircraft. The combination of the Soviet numerical lead in ballistic missiles and the United States advantage in heavy bombers left a rough equality between the two sides in total strategic nuclear delivery vehicles. However, due to its multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) program, the United States still held a substantial lead in the number of ballistic missile warheads, in the order of two-to-one, and in total strategic

weapons (ballistic missile warheads plus bomber weapons).

The Soviets unfortunately were not content with the achievement of rough equality and continued their massive buildup. As a result, today the Soviet Union equals or surpasses the United States in most significant quantitative measures of strategic capability. The total number of Soviet ballistic missiles has climbed to some 2,350. The U.S. total, on the other hand, has fallen to about 1,600 due to the retirement of older Polaris SLBMs. The Soviets have closed the gap in ballistic missile warheads, with each side now possessing about 7,500 (on average, Soviet warheads are more destructive). While the U.S. B-52 force has continued to age and further decline in numbers, the Soviets introduced the modern Backfire bomber. Now, the two sides thus have roughly the same number of strategic bombers.

The Soviet buildup and the erosion of U.S. strategic superiority are outlined above. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a conscious decision by the United States to allow the Soviet Union to attain equality in strategic forces. American strategic thinking had come to the conclusion that superiority would be difficult and costly to maintain and, in any case, was not necessary to support a U.S. defense posture based on the objective of deterring war. Further, it was believed that strategic parity could provide the basis for a stable East-West relationship. Thus the United States tacitly agreed to accept parity with the Soviet Union.

By any objective measure, the Soviet achieved rough equality in strategic nuclear forces in the early to mid-1970s. What is disturbing is that throughout the decade, the Soviet buildup showed no sign of slowing but continued unabated. Through the 1970s to the present, the Soviet strategic program has had, and continues to show, a tremendous amount of momentum. Since 1972, the Soviets have introduced three new ICBM types (the SS-17, SS-18, and SS-19, all with the capability of carrying MIRVs), four new SLBMs (the SS-N-8, SS-N-17, SS-N-18, and SS-N-20, the latter two capable of being MIRVed), three Delta class ballistic missile submarine types, the Typhoon ballistic missile submarine, and the Backfire bomber.

During the same period, the United States exercised a significant degree of unilateral restraint. Once the MIRV programs for the Poseidon SLBM and Minuteman III ICBM were completed in the first half of the 1970s, the United States slowed or canceled a number of strategic programs. The cruise missile program was cut back and delayed as was construction of the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine for the Trident SLBM. Development of the MX ICBM was slowed, and the Carter Administration decided to cancel the B-1 bomber program. The Soviets gave no sign that they were prepared to reciprocate this restraint; on the contrary, the pace of their strategic programs clearly indicated that they were not.

The Soviet buildup and the adverse changes in the strategic balance occurred during the same period as the U.S.-Soviet negotiations on strategic forces. This is not to say that there were no benefits from the SALT process. However, following the high hopes created for arms control during the SALT I process, SALT II proved a clear disappointment. Indeed, it was during the negotiation of SALT II that the Soviet buildup reached new heights. This was a period not only of adverse change in the strategic balance against the United States, but also one during which the stability of the balance began to be threatened by the introduction of Soviet systems with the capability to destroy U.S. retaliatory systems, i.e., the threat posed by Soviet MIRVed ICBMs with warheads large enough and accurate enough to destroy U.S. ICBMs in their hardened silos.

The Reagan Administration's Approach

When the Reagan Administration took office in January 1981, it ordered a major in-depth review of U.S. security and arms control policies. In doing so, four key objectives were outlined for U.S. arms control policy:

Security. Arms control is not an end in itself but should enhance the security of the United States and its allies while at the same time reducing the risk of war.

Militarily significant reductions. Arms control efforts should seek to reduce the number and destructive potential of nuclear systems and military forces, not simply to cap them at high levels as in previous agreements.

Equality. Arms control agreements should bring about mutual reductions to equal ceilings for similar types of forces. Equality is fundamental to balanced arms control, deterrence, and stability and to a U.S.-Soviet relationship based on mutual restraint and reciprocity.

Verifiability. Arms control agreements should contain effective measures for verification that insure both sides comply with its provisions. Otherwise, neither side will have the confidence necessary to accept an agreement providing for deep reductions in forces fundamental to its national security. Effective verification is particularly important for Western security given the closed nature of the Soviet system.

A number of major arms control initiatives were launched by the United States as different aspects of the overall review were completed. In November 1981 the President proposed the "zero/zero" approach for the U.S.-Soviet negotiations on intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), offering to cancel deployment of Pershing II and the ground-launched cruise missile in return for the elimination of Soviet SS-20, SS-4, and SS-5 missiles. Early in 1982, the United States introduced into NATO a new approach to the East-West negotiations on mutual and balanced force reductions (MBFR), which became the basis for the West's July initiative in the Vienna talks. And in May, the President announced the U.S. approach to START.

As part of its review of strategic arms control policy, the United States painstakingly examined the course of the SALT process and looked at new approaches to achieve actual reductions in the levels of nuclear arms. The SALT II agreement was not considered to be an acceptable long-term framework for strategic arms reduction because of a number of critical shortcomings and asymmetries embodied in that treaty. The most basic fault of SALT II was the fact that it would permit substantial growth in both sides' strategic forces, rather than mandatory reductions. Another major shortcoming was the fact that SALT II's unit of account was the launcher; no direct limitations were applied to the number of warheads permitted each side, even though warheads are a better measure of capability than launchers. Under the terms of the treaty, the Soviet Union could have actually increased the number of its ballistic missile warheads significantly. A major asymmetry was the codification of a unilateral Soviet right to maintain some 300 heavy ICBMs. Another asymmetry: The Soviet Backfire bomber was not counted under the aggregate total for strategic nuclear delivery vehicles specified by the treaty, despite its intercontinental capability. Finally, the protocol to the treaty, even though it would have expired by now, set the undesirable precedent of limiting U.S. intermediate-range systems, e.g., the ground-launched cruise missile, without imposing limits at all on comparable Soviet systems such as the SS-20.

START Proposal

In view of these inadequacies, the Administration concluded that it would be inappropriate to seek ratification of SALT II. Renegotiation was considered, but the United States decided it would be a better use of time to take a new approach to the problem of reducing strategic forces rather than trying to renegotiate SALT II so as to rectify its

shortcomings and make it an acceptable agreement. Nevertheless, President Reagan's START proposal builds upon the SALT process. Indeed, the President has stated that in order to create a positive atmosphere for START negotiations, U.S. policy will be to take no action that would undercut existing agreements, provided the Soviets exercise equal restraint.

The United States considered ways to use reductions to enhance the stability of the strategic balance. Certain systems, because of their capabilities and characteristics, can undermine that stability. Likewise, other systems with different capabilities and characteristics can contribute to a stable balance. Systems which threaten the other side's forces with quick preemptive destruction are destabilizing because they undermine the other side's confidence in its deterrent capability. In a crisis situation, this could result in a temptation to use these systems first out of a fear of losing them.

Ballistic missiles are thus more destabilizing than slow-flying bombers. This is because ballistic missiles have short flight times (in the order of 30 minutes for ICBMs, less for SLBMs), carry multiple warheads, and are being made continually more accurate, thus making them increasingly suitable for preemptive attack against the other side's nuclear forces. Bombers and cruise missiles, on the other hand, have very long flight times (7 to 10 hours), thereby making them inappropriate weapons for a first-strike attack. In the same sense, ICBMs are more destabilizing than SLBMs, due to the larger size and greater accuracy of land-based missiles. Moreover, existing ICBMs are deployed in fixed sites, thus making them vulnerable to attack—perhaps even inviting it in a crisis. Missile-carrying submarines, due to the difficulties of their detection, are practically invulnerable. SLBMs do not run the risk of being lost if not used promptly in a crisis situation.

Thus the large number of MIRVed ICBMs in the Soviet strategic force is of particular concern to the United States. The Soviets have deployed some 150 SS–17, 300 SS–18, and 300 SS–19 missiles in the last 10 years. These missiles can carry at least 4, 10, and 6 warheads, respectively. The SS–18 and SS–19 warheads are large enough and accurate enough to threaten U.S. ICBMs in hardened silos. In fact, the Soviet Union now has a capability to destroy most of the U.S. ICBM force in a first strike using only a portion of its ICBM force. Their possession of this capability threatens to destabilize the strategic balance, undermines confidence in the U.S. deterrent posture, and would decrease stability during crises.

The President's proposal is based on a two-phased approach to the reduction of strategic armaments. In the first phase, the United States will seek to reduce the number of ballistic missile warheads by at least one-third, to about 5,000 warheads for each side, of which no more than one-half (2,500) would be deployed on intercontinental ballistic missiles. At the same time, the United States also seeks to reduce the number of deployed ballistic missiles on each side to 850 missiles. For the second phase, the United States will consider further reductions in these areas, while at the same time reducing the overall destructive power of the two sides' forces to equal levels. Included in this would be a mutual ceiling on ballistic missile throw-weight below the current U.S. level.

A number of elements of the U.S. approach merit particular attention. First, we have chosen to focus on ballistic missile warheads as well as deployed missiles as the units of account as these provide a much more meaningful measure of strategic capability than just launchers, the unit of account in SALT I and SALT II. This makes inherent sense—an approach based on launchers alone would equate a Soviet SS–18 carrying 10 warheads with a U.S. Minuteman II carrying a single warhead. The launcher limits in SALT I in no way hindered either side's efforts to increase the number of its ballistic missile warheads. In fact, total deliverable Soviet warheads increased by almost four times over the period between 1972, when SALT I was signed, and 1982, when START opened. And SALT II, while putting a ceiling on the number of warheads permitted on any single ICBM and SLBM, would have permitted further increases in the existing total number of warheads.

In the second phase, the United States will seek additional constraints, including equal limits on throw-weight. Throw-weight is an important factor in the strategic balance—it is the large throw-weight of Soviet ballistic missiles which gives them the potential to carry large numbers of warheads with high yields and thereby threaten our land-based forces. Constraints which force the sides toward systems with less destructive potential (i.e., lower throw-weight) are in the interests of stability.

The U.S. approach focuses on ballistic missiles for definite reasons. Simple reductions in any category of strategic forces may not necessarily increase stability; in some cases, it may decrease stability. It, therefore, makes good sense to focus reductions on those elements of strategic forces that pose particular threats to stability. Ballistic missiles, above all ICBMs, thus merit special attention. Given their fixed locations, ICBMs are vulnerable to preemptive attack while, at the same time, their accuracy and large warheads provide precisely the means for executing such an attack.

A number of criticisms have been directed at the U.S. approach, to which I would like to reply. First, it is charged that the U.S. proposal is one sided and by focusing on ballistic missiles would discriminate against the Soviet Union. This is simply not so. There now exists a rough equality in the number of ballistic missile warheads, so the U.S. proposal would force equal reductions by both sides. Granted, the Soviet Union would have to make larger cuts in its ICBM force than the United States. This results from the Soviets' relatively greater reliance on ICBMs. In any event, it would be dangerous to give formal legitimation to the massive Soviet buildup in these destabilizing systems. The United States, for its part, would be forced to make deeper reductions in its SLBM program, given the relatively greater U.S. dependence on sea-based systems.

A second charge is that the U.S. proposal would force the Soviet Union to restructure its strategic forces away from the traditional Soviet reliance on ICBMs. This is true, but is it bad for the Soviet Union?

Today, only the United States faces the situation where its land-based missiles are vulnerable to preemptive attack. But this will not remain the case in the future—as technology advances, warheads are becoming more accurate. The Soviet ICBM force will not remain invulnerable forever. Thus the vulnerability of land-based missiles is a matter over which both sides should be concerned. Indeed, a number of Soviet experts are beginning to recognize this potential problem. A primary attribute of the U.S. proposal is that it will force a relative shift away from ICBMs, resulting in a less destabilizing force structure on both sides. This is in the Soviet interest as well as our own.

A third charge is that the U.S. proposal would exclude heavy bombers and cruise missiles from limitation. This charge is unfounded. President Reagan has made it clear that "nothing is excluded" from the negotiations, and that the United States will negotiate in good faith and consider all serious Soviet proposals. We are prepared to treat bombers and other strategic systems in an equitable manner in the context of our phased approach. At the same time, ballistic missiles pose a greater threat to stability than do these slow-flying, clearly second-strike systems and should be accorded appropriate priority in the negotiations.

The U.S. refusal to accept a freeze on strategic nuclear weapons has also been questioned. We oppose a freeze for a number of reasons. First, it would prevent the United States from implement-

ing steps to redress certain deficiencies which are emerging in its strategic forces, deficiencies which undermine the strategic balance. These steps are now critical given the unilateral—and unreciprocated—restraint exercised by the United States in the latter half of the 1970s. Moreover, the Soviets are clearly concerned about the U.S. strategic modernization program. Going forward with the U.S. modernization program gives them a strong incentive to negotiate seriously in START. Were the United States to accept a freeze at current, unequal levels, what motivation would the U.S.S.R. have to accept significant reductions to equal ceilings? Another reason for our opposition to the freeze is that it is just not good enough. We do not want to cap the existing levels of strategic arms, we want major reductions in those forces. Further, developing an effective and verifiable mutual freeze with the Soviet Union would not be a simple matter. It would involve long and complicated negotiations. Both sides' time and energies will be better spent pursuing an agreement providing for significant, equitable, and verifiable reductions.

Summary

The START approach announced by President Reagan in May reflects the criteria for sound arms control and is fully consistent with the Administration's arms control principles. It provides for militarily significant reductions to equal levels of forces for the United States and U.S.S.R. It will enhance U.S. and allied security—as well as that of the Soviet Union—by reducing the risk of war and helping to secure a stable strategic balance. Finally, the United States will be proposing verification measures that insure each side has confidence in the other's compliance with the treaty.

Recognizing the strategic unity of the North Atlantic alliance, the United States has kept the allies fully informed of the development of the principles of our arms control approach and of the specifics of our START position. The U.S. proposal was soundly endorsed by foreign ministers at the May ministerial in Luxembourg and by heads of government at the June summit in Bonn. The documents of both meetings called on the Soviet Union to join with the United States in pursuing significant reductions in strategic forces with a focus on the most destabilizing systems.

The United States will keep the allies fully briefed on START developments. This process was begun with Ambassador Rowny's briefing of the North Atlantic Council on June 18 prior to his traveling to Geneva for the opening of START. Such consultations will be held periodically during the course of the negotiations.

The START negotiations will be complex. They touch on forces and subjects central to the vital national security interests of the United States and U.S.S.R. At the same time, I am optimistic about their chance of success. While the Soviets have been publicly critical of our approach, such public posturing is not uncommon, and they have not rejected the concept of significant reductions. As they learn the details of our position in Geneva, I hope they will come to realize that our proposal offers the U.S.S.R. substantial benefits.

The START process is now underway. The United States is fully committed to fair and balanced arms control, and has made a good faith proposal to the Soviet Union. If the Soviets reciprocate this attitude, we have the opportunity to arrest the arms race and reverse it—to begin down the road to the genuine reduction of nuclear arsenals. ■

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