

# The Rise and Fall of Arms Control

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Avis Bohlen

President George W. Bush's announcement in December 2001 of the US intention to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was a defining moment in the history of strategic arms control. It was mourned by many, but the disastrous impact on East–West and transatlantic relations predicted a year earlier – the allies' outrage, the Russian countermeasures – failed to materialise. Russian President Vladimir Putin's reaction was mild. His statement, issued within hours of Bush's announcement, merely expressed regret at the US decision, asserted that it posed no threat to Russia's security and noted with satisfaction that the two sides had agreed to conclude an agreement providing for further reductions. Putin set the tone: America's allies limited themselves to regret – tinged, to be sure, by a broader anxiety about the unilateralism of the Bush administration.

Was this the triumph of the ideological right or the culmination of a secular trend tied to the end of the Cold War? The answer is, to some degree, both. President Bush campaigned on a promise to move beyond the ABM Treaty – long a target of American conservatives – and his administration was and remains famously averse to more or less all forms of arms control. But the muted reaction to his December 2001 announcement tells us that something else was going on. Bush administration diplomacy, though uncharacteristically adroit, was hardly the whole explanation. The eleventh of September was key, offering Putin a window of opportunity to ally himself with the United States in the fight against terrorism and in the process to finesse old quarrels. Doubtless he foresaw that the demise of the ABM Treaty was inevitable. While not a welcome development, it lacked the threatening implications for Russia's security that it would have had even ten years earlier. The

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strategic if not the political rationale for the ABM Treaty belonged to an earlier era.

And so strategic arms control died not with a bang, but a whimper, leaving the question of what it had all meant and what, if any, are its broader lessons. This seems an appropriate moment to step back and try to make sense of an activity that occupied centre-stage for several decades, not only in US–Soviet affairs, but also in America’s relations with its European allies, produced some of the most heated controversies of the Cold War and generated thousands of pages of learned and passionate analysis from some of the most illustrious minds of the post-war era.

### **The early years**

The impulse to control and regulate the instruments of war is nearly as old as war itself, but the advent of nuclear weapons gave the enterprise new urgency. That a new and terrifying chapter in human history was opening was evident to all those in on the secret of the Manhattan Project, scientists and politicians alike. Long before Alamogordo, the scientists had lobbied unsuccessfully to open early discussions with the Russians with a view to establishing effective post-war international control. After Hiroshima, pressures from US allies and world opinion intensified. The result was the Baruch plan, a proposal put forward by the United States in June 1946, which envisaged the creation of an international body, the Atomic Development Authority, with a global monopoly over virtually the whole field of atomic energy. The plan quickly foundered, however, on the harsh realities of the Cold War. Thereafter, UN disarmament bodies continued to grind away at various empty and propagandistic schemes for banning the bomb in the context of complete and general disarmament.

In 1952, the US had acquired the hydrogen bomb; the Soviet Union followed suit a year later. Continued atmospheric testing of these thermonuclear weapons with their hugely increased destructive power and radioactive fallout generated increasing public protest and pressures to end testing.

A stand-alone agreement to ban all nuclear tests was first proposed by the Soviets in May 1955. However, eight years went by before the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited only atmospheric testing, became a reality, despite continued strong public pressure and the support of two US presidents. The reasons were to become a familiar pattern in the history of arms control. Mutual suspicion between Soviets and Americans still ran high, and the ups and downs of the relationship blew the agreement more than once off-course. Not until 5 August 1963, was the Limited Test Ban Treaty signed by the foreign ministers of the

US, USSR and UK, just a few hours short of the anniversary of Hiroshima. The treaty was approved by the US Senate handily in late September, though not unanimously: 19 senators voted against it.

The Limited Test Ban Treaty was significant as the first East–West nuclear agreement. It was also a political necessity because public opinion would no longer tolerate atmospheric fallout. At the same time, it put nuclear issues and arms control squarely on the US–Soviet political agenda, as an issue to be dealt with by foreign ministers and heads of state along with Berlin or Vietnam. It did little, however, to halt the growth of nuclear arsenals on either side or, for that matter, to limit testing. Once the issue of nuclear fallout fell off the agenda, nuclear issues receded from the public consciousness. Testing, driven underground, continued unabated. Some 54% of all US tests conducted between 1945 and 1980 took place after 1963. And in 2003, a comprehensive test ban remains as controversial and distant a goal as in 1963.

### **The SALT experience**

Kennedy's assassination and Khrushchev's overthrow a year later ended the warming trend in US–Soviet relations and with it the promise of further arms control. Throughout the 1960s, the strategic arsenals of both sides grew enormously; as the Soviets began to catch up with the US, the idea of arms-limitation talks once again seemed compelling. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, however, plans to open negotiations the following month on offensive and defensive weapons were cancelled, along with a planned summit between US President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Soviet leadership.

Thus it was that the beginnings of strategic arms control came to be a product of the Nixon–Kissinger years. Richard Nixon's larger goal was to restore US standing and influence in the world, so severely weakened by Vietnam. The president and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, saw arms control as an obvious subject for discussion with the Soviets, but primarily a political undertaking which would serve as one instrument in a larger and intricate strategy of detente. The prospect of US–Soviet parity in nuclear weapons had made arms control once again a topic of some relevance, even urgency. The US build-up of its strategic triad was essentially complete by 1965. The Soviets, though later in getting started, by the late 1960s were rapidly catching up. Their strategic arsenals expanded from a mere 250 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in 1965 to 1,000 in 1969, and they continued to deploy some 250 ICBMs and 128 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) per year, thus making it only a matter of time before they caught up with and surpassed the Americans.

The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) began in October 1969 and concluded with the May 1972 signing of two agreements: the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; and the Interim Agreement on Strategic Offensive Arms. The formal negotiations alternated between Helsinki and Vienna. Half way through, Kissinger opened up a second parallel negotiating track with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. A back channel is essential for any negotiation, but the Nixon–Kissinger obsession with secrecy and Kissinger’s vain insistence on flying solo produced some unnecessary mistakes and a legacy of mistrust that came back to haunt the whole SALT experience.

Both offensive and defensive strategic weapons were on the SALT agenda, but defences were dealt with more completely and more satisfactorily. The ABM Treaty limited each side to two ground-based ABM sites (reduced by mutual agreement in 1974 to one) and essentially banned the development of all other forms of strategic defensive systems.<sup>1</sup> The treaty lasted just under three decades and took on a

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symbolic status as the cornerstone of strategic stability that came to transcend its specific provisions. In effect, both sides renounced the idea of building nation-wide defences for either their cities or their missiles against nuclear attack by the other side. It was a significant and indeed unique achievement in that it closed off an expensive arms race in one area of technology and put an end to a strategic debate that had been roiling the US since the early 1960s. It was

not, however, the deliberate US–Soviet commitment to ‘Mutual Assured Destruction’ (MAD) – that is, to the desirability of mutual vulnerability – that its more ardent supporters (and, indeed, its detractors) suggest.

The real story was more prosaic. The ABM Treaty codified a reality rather than a choice. By the time Nixon took office in 1969, the US ABM system was already in deep political trouble, facing strong opposition from the scientific community, from the US Senate and from an energetic movement of grassroots activists. Opponents argued convincingly that the technology was ineffective, or at best immature; a would-be attacker could always overwhelm any anti-missile defence by building more missiles and could do so relatively cheaply. It was, moreover, destabilising, an invitation to pre-empt. Nixon was unable to reverse the trend: ABM funding was authorised by the Senate in 1969 thanks only to a tie-breaking vote by Vice-President Spiro Agnew. ABM was a wasting asset that survived just long enough to serve as a bargaining chip for SALT, but it would not have survived failure to reach an arms-control agreement with the Russians. Conversely, if there had been any chance of

congressional approval, ABM would have gone forward. Thus, to interpret the ABM Treaty as a common commitment to MAD or a kind of grand allegiance to the abstract principle of remaining vulnerable is to ascribe motives to the principal actors that did not exist. Both sides recognised that vulnerability to nuclear attack was not a choice but a fact of life (though not necessarily a welcome one for the Soviets). Neither then nor later was invulnerability an available option. Moreover the anti-ballistic missile technology was a lemon.

On offensive forces, the US partially succeeded in its goal of slowing or halting the momentum of the Soviet build-up. Washington was playing a weak hand: for the Soviets, the freeze on strategic forces was a second-order priority, the coin in which they paid – reluctantly – for the ABM Treaty. Even as ABM was rapidly losing support in the US, the Soviets continued to increase their forces, adding 450 new ICBMs and 350 SLBMs during the first 20 months of SALT. The Interim Agreement halted the momentum with limits that McGeorge Bundy justly characterised as ‘temporary, high and incompletely agreed’: a five-year freeze on the ICBM and SLBM launchers of both sides, with ICBMs at existing levels and SLBMs at a level that allowed for some increase.<sup>2</sup> In both categories, the permitted Soviet levels exceeded those of the US by a wide margin. The disparity was not militarily significant, since the US had the advantage in heavy bombers (not limited by the Interim Agreement) as well as a larger number of warheads and a soon-to-be-deployed Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) capability. But it proved to be a significant political vulnerability.

The US fared less well in its efforts to limit the Soviet heavy missile known as the SS-9 – a harbinger of difficulties to come. No single issue so dominates the history of US–Soviet arms control as the Soviet heavy missiles, their perceived threat to US land-based missiles and the long and unsuccessful US effort to constrain them. The Soviets early on showed a propensity for building heavy, land-based missiles, of which the SS-9 was the first, in part because they were less adept than the US at building small, accurate missiles that could be launched rapidly, such as *Minuteman*. In addition, the quality of the Soviet nuclear-fuelled ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN) fleet lagged far behind that of the US.

Technologically regressive or not, with a 25-megaton warhead the Soviet heavy missiles possessed a huge destructive capacity. The Interim Agreement did virtually nothing to constrain them, though not for lack of trying. Such constraints as were agreed upon were ambiguous. There were no agreed definitions of heavy and light missiles or, for that matter, of silo dimensions. The Soviets refused to be pinned down because they were already developing a new, larger missile. Lacking an

agreed definition, the US provided its own in the form of a unilateral statement, a triumph of wishful thinking. Kissinger assured the Senate that the Soviets could not substitute for an existing missile any missile larger than the heaviest light missile that was in existence, namely, the SS-11.<sup>3</sup> When the SS-19, a new missile of supposedly prohibited dimensions, made its appearance not long after SALT I, there were immediate cries of Soviet cheating. In fact, Moscow had made no commitment.

Worse, SALT I did nothing to limit MIRVs, although it was fully realised that the threat of heavy missiles would be multiplied many times over when, inevitably, the Soviets deployed their own MIRV technology. Nothing was done to limit MIRVs because there was no real wish on either side to do so. MIRVing was seen by the US as a technology of great promise, even by ABM sceptics such as Johnson administration Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who thought MIRVs provided the answer to both Soviet missile defences and their heavy missiles. Although the technology had its detractors both in Congress and in the strategic community, they never mobilised as others had done against ABM defences. In any case, by the time of the SALT negotiations, the horse had already bolted; first tested in 1968, MIRVed warheads were deployed on *Minuteman III*, starting in June 1970, and on *Poseidon* in January 1971. Apart from one half-hearted attempt, the US did not raise the subject in the negotiations. The Soviets, who were already developing their own MIRV technology, also chose not to pursue the issue. This was the great failure of SALT I. 'In retrospect', Kissinger ruefully admitted in 1974, 'I wish I had thought through the implications of a MIRVed world more thoughtfully in 1969 and in 1970 than I did'.<sup>4</sup>

When the SALT agreements were signed, Nixon announced that a new era was at hand, but not even its most ardent supporters claimed that SALT I was much more than a beginning, a first step in what was hoped would be a succession of agreements. Both agreements were handily approved by Congress, but according to the iron law of arms-control treaties, there was a price. The administration linked approval of SALT I to approval of an increase of \$1.2 billion for strategic forces, including the B-1 bomber, acceleration of *Trident I* and development of the long-range cruise missile. Meanwhile, the hardline Democratic Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson attached an amendment to the Senate's treaty approval requiring that any future agreements limit US and Soviet forces at equal levels. Finally, Kissinger shamefully acquiesced to Jackson's demand for a purge of 14 top officials from the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

Negotiations for SALT II resumed almost immediately in November 1972, but it was not until June 1979 that the treaty was finally signed by

President Jimmy Carter. Six months later, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan ended any hopes for ratification. It is sometimes argued that arms control was the core of détente, yet the lesson of SALT II was that arms control could not survive in isolation from the broader relationship that sustained it. And from the time of the 1973 Nixon–Brezhnev summit, that broader relationship had begun to decline for a variety of reasons: the weakness of the post-Watergate presidency; disenchantment with the limitations of détente itself, not least of all in the field of arms control; and a strong, frequently vicious right-wing assault on the very idea of accommodation with the Soviet Union.

The erosion of presidential authority begins with the drama of Watergate. Neither of Nixon’s successors possessed his flair for foreign affairs or his dominance of the foreign-policy agenda. With Nixon forced from office, Kissinger’s own position was greatly weakened. Nixon’s successor, Gerald Ford, initially hoped to reach a SALT II agreement, but found himself under increasingly sharp attack from Ronald Reagan and the Republican right; Ford ended by dropping the word ‘détente’ from his vocabulary. Following Ford, the Carter presidency demonstrated a pattern of muddled and contradictory signals on US–Soviet relations. The continuing conflict between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski translated into an image of indecision and weakness.

The Nixon administration’s exaggerated claims for détente made disillusionment inevitable. From 1973, there was a growing feeling in the US that détente was not working and that the Soviets had got the best of the bargain. The feeling was fed, among other things, by the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, the appearance of Soviet-supported Cuban soldiers in Angola, a rise in US bread prices because of Soviet grain purchases and the humiliation of Saigon’s fall in 1975. The foreboding continued under Carter, as the Soviets appeared to consolidate strategic gains in Somalia, Angola, Vietnam and Afghanistan. In fact, these gains were to prove highly ephemeral, but they added to a popular image of inexorable soviet advance and US decline. High oil prices and inflation fuelled American pessimism, as did the Iranian hostage crisis (1979–81). Finally, the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan torpedoed not only SALT II, but the last vestiges of a political dialogue.

High on the list of disappointments was the failure of SALT I to slow the arms build-up. While US military budgets generally declined throughout the 1970s, the Soviets continued to increase their forces. At

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one point, the Soviets were producing six new ICBMs a week. The first Soviet MIRV test took place sooner than expected, in 1973; while no less than four new MIRVed missiles were tested by the USSR in the following year. The Soviets deployed four versions of the SS-18 between 1974 and 1979, one of them with ten warheads. Two variants of the even more alarming (to some) SS-19 were deployed between 1974 and 1976, in direct contradiction of Kissinger's assurances to Senator Jackson. There were repeated charges of Soviet SALT violations, though none were proven.

Despite these unpromising circumstances, the negotiations continued to make slow progress. The Ford–Brezhnev meeting of December 1974 produced the Vladivostok accord, a framework that set the number of strategic delivery vehicles at equal levels for each side as well as setting equal ceilings for MIRVed ICBMs and SLBMs. It was indeed a modest breakthrough, which was, however, loudly attacked from right and left. The opponents of SALT within the administration gained the upper hand, and no further progress was possible. Carter's first move upon taking office in 1977 was to cast aside the Vladivostok framework in favour of radical new proposals essentially incorporating the agenda of Senator Jackson and his aide, Richard Perle, demanding equal throw-weight and disproportionate deep cuts in the Soviet land-based missile force. When the Soviets indignantly and publicly rejected the proposals, Carter reversed himself, authorising Vance to revert to the Vladivostok framework. The image of vacillation and weakness irrevocably cost him Jackson's support and the confidence of the European allies. The negotiations dragged on for the next two years, with Vance meeting almost monthly with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. But by the time the treaty was signed in June 1979, the broader relationship was in ruins and the treaty was under heavy attack from anti-détente forces.

A vociferous and well-organised right-wing backlash against detente and arms control had been gathering steam since the mid-1970s. This was led by, among others, the Committee on the Present Danger, founded by Paul Nitze and Eugene Rostow in 1976 upon an alliance of so-called Jackson Democrats and conservative Republicans. In their view any relationship with the Soviet Union other than one of unremitting vigilance and hostility was dangerous and mistaken – dangerous because it had led the US to let down its guard and neglect its defences; mistaken because the Soviet Union remained bent on strategic superiority and world domination. The SALT model of arms control epitomised these delusions, and compounded the danger.

The long-standing US concern with the potential first-strike capability of Soviet heavy missile was spun by the Committee on the Present Danger into a highly implausible scenario built around the so-called 'window of vulnerability'. By the mid-1980s, according to this scenario, a

US president, faced with the prospect of losing his land-based missile force to a preemptive attack by the vastly superior and MIRVed Soviet heavy missiles, would have little choice but preemptively to capitulate. The Soviets, conscious of their superiority, would be emboldened to undertake new aggression across the globe; in the face of which the US would be obliged to retreat and face a succession of 'bitter choices between war and acquiescence under pressure'.<sup>5</sup> Others buttressed these lurid scenarios with highly selective and tendentious readings from Soviet military writers that purported to prove that the Soviet Union believed it could fight and win a nuclear war.<sup>6</sup>

These were phoney arguments from start to finish. But they were effective in sinking SALT II. The Carter administration, itself divided and increasingly on the defensive, sought to reassure key senators that the SALT II treaty would not lull the US into letting down its guard. Carter reversed his earlier decision to slow down development of the MX missile, though he continued to view it as a 'nauseating waste of money'. He also proposed a 5% annual increase in the defence budget over the next five years, a step which won SALT II a grudging endorsement from Kissinger and Ford.

The ratification of SALT II was already very much in doubt when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 led Carter to withdraw the treaty from Senate consideration. It deserved better. It was, in many respects, a better treaty than SALT I and was, moreover, better in 1979 than it had been at the end of the Ford administration. It rectified some of the lacunae of SALT I and closed off some potential loopholes, limiting not only the total number of delivery vehicles on each side, but also the crucial subcategories of MIRVed missiles, MIRVed ICBMs and heavy missiles. Critics rightly charged that in the age of the MIRV, limits on delivery vehicles were meaningless, because warheads were not limited. But SALT II took a stab at the problem. The so-called fractionation limits, which established a maximum number of warheads permitted on each missile, indirectly set an upper limit on total warheads. The so-called counting rule made it impossible for them to cheat on these numbers by claiming that, for example, the SS-18 only had eight warheads per missile, if it had in fact been flight-tested with ten. The rule established that once a missile had been tested with a certain number of warheads it would always be counted as having that number. The ban, with one exception for each side, on new types of missiles set, for the first time, limits to qualitative improvements, promising an end to the seemingly endless introduction of new missiles that had been so prominent a feature of the 1970s. The ban also reflected the fact that this particular technology had probably run its course. The ban on telemetry encryption gave an

important boost to verification. The agreement to exchange data suggested that the Soviets were becoming somewhat more open as time went on. In almost every technical respect it represented an advance over SALT I.

But like SALT I, SALT II did not in any way halt the upward climb of nuclear arsenals, particularly on the Soviet side. The limits built in ample room for future increases in deployed nuclear warheads and thus, in a sense, legitimated them. The MIRVed ICBM limit, for example, allowed the Soviets to add another 1,300 warheads. On the US side, it accommodated the MX and more cruise missiles.

These were hardly trivial defects, but arms control, like politics, was the art of the possible. SALT II was criticised for what it did *not* do: for example, redressing the vulnerability of US ICBMs. But this was altogether beyond the capacity of arms control to solve, reflecting as it did deep-rooted national preferences and choices about force structure. Arms control could not accomplish more than US strategic planners. And although US military officers worried about Soviet heavy missiles, they (unlike Nitze and the Committee on the Present Danger) continued to have confidence in the deterrent power of US retaliatory forces. To the critics' complaint that, unless arms control achieved reductions, it was not worth having, SALT supporters put forward an alternative view. SALT II was one step, they argued, in an incremental progression, an improvement over SALT I that would, in SALT III, lead to reductions. In the meantime, the treaty defined the upper limits, began to close off the qualitative arms race and brought significant gains in transparency and predictability.

Both views have some merit. But in the end, the fate of SALT II was decided not by the superior argument but by politics. Arms control required the support of a broader relationship, which by 1979 no longer existed. The combination of Soviet aggressiveness in the Third World, the Soviet strategic build-up, and clamorous and unrelenting political attack by US hardliners that vastly inflated the import and danger of Soviet actions for US national security were enough to seal its doom.

What came next was at once ironic and unexpected. According to Reagan and his supporters, SALT II gave the Soviets a 'definite margin of superiority', allowing them to double their nuclear capacity; nonetheless, his administration elected to continue Carter's policy of abiding by SALT II limits and did so, moreover, until 1986 – that is, beyond the life time of the treaty. The administration did so mainly at the urging of the US military, which valued the predictability provided by the treaty's constraints on Soviet forces and saw the agreement as a useful framework for its own force planning. The 'window of vulnerability', the period of supposed 'maximum danger', came and went without any sign

of the predicted Soviet muscle flexing, even though the number of deployed Soviet warheads, as predicted, increased substantially during the Reagan years (from 8,549 in 1981 to 11,630 in 1988). To the contrary, these were the Gorbachev years, and the beginning of the end for the Soviet system. In retrospect it seems evident how little Moscow shared the belief in a meaningful Soviet strategic superiority, let alone its political utility.

The window of vulnerability was closed with a stroke of the pen on 6 April 1983, by the Scowcroft Commission report on MX basing. The Commission was looking at a problem that two successive administrations had wrestled with, with increasingly ludicrous results. Briefly stated, the objective was to avoid a fixed-basing mode for the ten-warhead MX, which would make it a particularly fat and tempting target for a preemptive strike. The 30-odd alternatives proved each one more problematic and unworkable than the last, and Congress liked none of them. The Scowcroft commission recommended among other things deploying 100 MX missiles (half the number originally planned) in fixed silos. This, in the Commission's judgement, was acceptable, because the US possessed secure retaliatory forces sufficient to deter a Soviet first strike. This, of course, was precisely the argument that critics of the window-of-vulnerability thesis had advanced for years. Although Reagan did not accept all the Commission's recommendations, no more was heard of the window of vulnerability or, for that matter, of the margin of superiority.<sup>7</sup>

### **Assessing the SALT experience**

The death of SALT was the end of serious arms-control negotiations for many years. How then should we assess the whole experience of SALT and arms control during the 1970s? The concrete results were modest at best. Few arms were controlled, let alone reduced. During the decade after SALT II was signed, the SALT regime allowed both sides to more than double their number of deployed warheads. Neither the Soviets nor the US was at any time prepared to give up a single weapon system regarded as promising, even when it was known, as with MIRVs, that highly negative consequences would result. Missile defences were the exception, but it was lack of political support in the US rather than arms-control considerations that made the ABM Treaty possible. Strategic theorists had argued against ABM systems on the grounds that they would stimulate a destabilising build-up of offensive systems; yet even with the ABM Treaty in place, the destabilising build-up occurred anyway. Reflecting the perennial fear that arms-control agreements would lull the US into letting down its guard, both treaties stimulated increases in the US defence budget and the

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development or acceleration of new strategic systems. SALT I produced the B-1 and accelerated *Trident* as well as the cruise missile, which came into being in part as a Kissingerian bargaining chip. SALT II produced the MX and a 5% increase in the defence budget. Even the December 1979 NATO decision to deploy 572 *Pershing* IIs and Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) in Europe had its origins in the concern of America's NATO allies that SALT II failed to limit two systems that threatened Europe, the *Backfire* bomber and the SS-20. In this sense, arms control has a lot to answer for.

Other claims are made for arms control – for example, that it reduced the risk of nuclear war, enhanced crisis stability and stabilised the arms race – but there is scant evidence to sustain them. The balance of terror proved remarkably stable with little help from arms control. The risk of nuclear war was low throughout the Cold War because of the inescapability of mutual deterrence. The conviction that a nuclear war, no matter who struck first, would be catastrophic for all concerned produced immense caution on both sides in avoiding confrontations which might escalate. This has been called the 'Long Peace': it is not clear that arms control did much to reinforce it.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, neither the existence of the ABM Treaty nor the reality of mutual deterrence was able to prevent the recurring and highly destabilising apprehension on both sides that the other was seeking to develop or indeed possessed a first-strike capability.

It is much easier, then, to say what arms control did not do than what it did. Yet there is no gainsaying its central importance during the Cold War. Its fortunes ebbed and flowed with the larger US–Soviet relationship, and it fared badly when efforts were made to insulate it from the fluctuations of that relationship. And yet the effort to control nuclear weapons became an imperative of US–Soviet relations: every US president from Eisenhower on, even those who began as sceptics, ended up sooner or later in pursuit of nuclear arms-control agreements with the Soviet Union. The nuclear fact was never far from the surface of US–Soviet relations: it was the Banquo's ghost of the Cold War. The possession by the US and the Soviet Union of thousands of nuclear weapons created a pervasive and continuous public anxiety throughout these years. In the face of this anxiety, the existence of a forum where nuclear issues were discussed between the two superpowers provided essential if incomplete reassurance for publics, for US allies and perhaps even for the governments involved. It made the tensions seem less dangerous, and when there was no arms-control dialogue, as was spectacularly the case in the first Reagan term, there was a palpable increase in anxiety.

Arms control became the indispensable companion to maintaining a robust defence posture. It was not an adjunct of strategy as the theorists of the 1960s had hoped; efforts to use it to affect strategic outcomes or to fix problems of force structure were, on the whole, a failure. But if it did not succeed in controlling arms, stabilising the arms race or persuading the Russians to abandon their preference for land-based mega missiles, it nonetheless produced modest gains in transparency and predictability valued by military planners. Over time, the frontiers of the dialogue expanded, as the Soviets became more open to exchanging data and discussing their strategic systems. To this extent it made a modest contribution to regulating the arms race, while the institutionalisation of the dialogue served to reinforce the reality of deterrence. Finally, if SALT failed, it nonetheless left a legacy. The treaties of the end of the Cold War, though called by different names, built inescapably on the accumulated experience of the 1970s.

### **The Reagan–Gorbachev years**

Ronald Reagan's first term ushered in a second Cold War in US–Soviet relations. Building up America's military strength was Reagan's first priority; until that happened, neither he nor his advisers had any interest in dialogue or arms-control negotiations with Moscow. Confrontation and blasts of anti-Soviet rhetoric replaced diplomacy. Loose talk about nuclear weapons created widespread public nervousness that nuclear war was imminent. A burgeoning nuclear-freeze movement sprang up and grew rapidly during 1981–82; by June 1982, it was able to mobilise half a million demonstrators in Central Park and was gaining adherents in Congress.

Pressure from allies and public opinion eventually forced resumption of both the intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) and strategic arms-control negotiations, but these quickly stalemated. The Reagan administration perfected the art of anti-arms-control: that is, offering proposals designed to elicit Soviet rejection, 'gambits with the objective of stalemate'.<sup>9</sup> At the insistence of America's NATO allies, INF negotiations were resumed in November 1981. Washington put forward the so-called 'zero option', the brainchild of Richard Perle: the US would agree to cancel the *Pershing* and GLCM deployments in return for the total elimination of all Soviet SS-20s, as well as a number of older systems. It proved, as intended, to be a showstopper. In summer 1982, during the famous 'walk in the woods', chief INF negotiator Paul Nitze and his Soviet counterpart worked out a potential compromise that would have allowed some cruise missile deployments in return for substantial Soviet SS-20 reductions. This was, however, vetoed by the Pentagon.

Lacking allied pressure, the opponents of arms control were able to delay the resumption of strategic arms talks even longer, until June 1982. Their new name – START, for Strategic Arms Reductions Talks – was designed to mark the break with flawed treaties of the past. The US made clear that the only acceptable basis for arms control would be a Soviet decision to restructure their forces entirely, along the lines of the US forces, by means of disproportionately large reductions – that is, falling disproportionately on the Soviets. Their ICBM warheads would, for example, have been reduced by 60% whereas the US would have been able to *increase* its land-based warheads by some 350. Heavy bombers and cruise missiles – both areas of US advantage – were excluded until a second phase.<sup>10</sup> The public message was that arms control must produce reductions; the (correct) expectation, however, was that it would produce nothing at all. Despite some minor adjustments, this remained the core of the US position until the start of *Pershing* and GLCM deployments in November 1983 led the Soviets to walk out of both negotiations. Coming on the heels of the Soviet shooting-down in September 1983 of a Korean airliner, the breakdown in relations seemed complete.

Within a year, however, signs of a slight thaw were perceptible. The approaching US presidential election, the growing influence of administration pragmatists – notably, Secretary of State George Shultz and National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane – and declining congressional support for Reagan's defence budgets all combined to bring about a wary resumption of US–Soviet dialogue. The Soviets, who had painted themselves into a corner by walking out, were increasingly worried about the president's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). In March 1985, arms-control negotiations resumed in Geneva within a new framework which encompassed a new defence and space negotiation to deal with missile defence and space-based weapons as well as the existing START and INF talks. The new talks quickly stalemated over SDI.

Reagan, in many ways a nuclear abolitionist at heart, found the whole idea of mutual deterrence morally repugnant; with his usual blithe disregard for technical practicalities, he became enamoured of the idea of a global shield that would render nuclear weapons, in his words, 'impotent' and 'obsolete'. It was a vision to which he held fast until the end of his term. Few in the US government shared his cheery confidence that a global shield was feasible, but many disparate elements found it useful for their own purposes. Realisable or not, it spoke to the same nuclear fears that had spawned the freeze movement and was thus a useful device for combating it. Conservatives had never given up on defences. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle had done their best to oppose the speech itself,

but quickly perceived that it could become a wondrous device for blocking arms-control agreements almost indefinitely and indeed might pave the way for abrogating the ABM Treaty itself. Shultz, to the contrary, thought it would make an arms-control agreement more likely by giving the Soviets an incentive to negotiate. Thus, SDI continued to gather steam. In November 1983, Reagan asked for a five-year, \$26bn appropriation in the defence budget. The Soviets obligingly took the bait: for the next several years, SDI or as they called it, 'space-strike weapons', was the programme for whose elimination or delay they seemed prepared to pay any price.

In March 1985, the same month that negotiations resumed in Geneva, the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev to the Soviet leadership changed the game forever. His difference from previous Soviet leaders was apparent from the outset: 'a man we can do business with', as the not-easily-charmed Margaret Thatcher famously commented.<sup>11</sup> He faced a challenge of crisis proportions. The Soviet system was suffering from 50 years of living beyond its means and 10–15 years of serious overstretch. The economy was a shambles, with military spending consuming an ever increasing share of GDP – as much as 25%, according to some estimates. Abroad, the 1980s had been a decade of bad news for the Soviet Union much as the 1970s had been for the US. Now it was the Soviet Union that seemed weak and without leadership. As one geriatric Secretary-General succeeded another, Soviet policy in the Third World suffered a series of setbacks in precisely those areas where it had advanced so triumphantly ten years earlier, most dramatically Afghanistan. The difference, of course, was that whereas the US in the 1970s had merely appeared weak, the Soviet weakness was all too real. This reality was obscured in the US by the phoney debates about Soviet strategic superiority and windows of vulnerability. Reagan was as lucky in his timing as Carter had been unlucky in his.

Gorbachev sought to reform the Soviet system and shake up the economy without giving up the essentials. Within those limits, however, he was a genuine radical who sought a fundamental transformation of the Soviet Union and its relations with the outside world. He understood clearly that the Soviet policies and build-up of the 1970s had done nothing to make his country more secure, but instead had isolated it, unifying the rest of the world in opposition to the Soviet threat and sparking a US military build-up which the USSR would be hard-put to

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match. To rebuild itself internally and to revitalise its economy, the Soviet Union needed accommodation with the West as well as drastic reductions in its military burden.

It is an article of faith among conservatives that the policies of the Reagan administration – the military build-up, the pressure of SDI, but also the confrontational diplomacy and the firm insistence on real arms control – brought about the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union by spending it into bankruptcy. The reality, of course, is less simplistic. Reagan's policies did not cause the crisis facing the Soviet Union by the mid-1980s; nor were they responsible for Gorbachev. Soviet policy in fact hardened during 1983–84 in response to Reagan's confrontational policies. Gorbachev reversed the hard line not because he had been brought to his knees, but because he saw more clearly than his predecessors that the hard-line policies were counterproductive. To achieve domestic transformation, he came to believe that it was necessary

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to demilitarise Soviet relations with the outside world, to move beyond the iron logic of the East–West military competition and the nuclear arms race. But to vindicate his course at home, Gorbachev needed arms-control agreements with the West. Reagan had no such need and he was therefore able to set the terms of the negotiation: SDI, on the one hand; and sweeping reductions proposals, on the other. Thus proposals designed to block agreements became, in a manner quite unintended by their creators, the currency of the negotiation. In effect, Gorbachev called the Reagan administration's bluff. But this was not foreordained.

As regards SDI, closing off what promised to be an expensive arms race in space and preserving the ABM Treaty were essential preconditions both for the arms-control agreements and for Gorbachev's broader transformation. But, in the end, Reagan's insistence on SDI and the broad interpretation of the ABM Treaty made it impossible to reach the strategic arms-control agreement that a later Republican administration would deem to be in the US interest.

In other words, it is the very specific and often bizarre combination of Reagan and Gorbachev that define the three dizzying years from 1985 to 1988. Like Khrushchev, Gorbachev had a streak of the gambler and he set out to transform his relations with the West by throwing out one dramatic arms-control proposal after another, like so many fireworks. Less than a month after taking office, a six-month moratorium on INF deployments; ten days later, a moratorium on nuclear testing; in September, a 50% cut in strategic weapons, contingent of course on a

commitment not to test, develop or deploy space-strike weapons. The arms-control agreement Gorbachev sought eluded him, however. His Geneva Summit with Reagan in November 1985 was cordial and returned arms control to a central place on the US–Soviet agenda, but there was no movement on SDI and Gorbachev returned home empty-handed. In January 1986, he returned to the charge with a three-stage proposal for the elimination of all nuclear weapons. But if anything, the chances of agreement seemed to be receding. In September 1985, the Reagan administration formally adopted the so-called ‘broad’ interpretation of the ABM Treaty – a highly disingenuous reading that claimed that a broad range of clearly prohibited testing was in fact permitted. In May 1986, Reagan announced that the US would no longer abide by the SALT II Treaty, alleging Soviet violations. There was now reason to be alarmed for the ABM Treaty, and in May 1986, Gorbachev modified his proposal for a ban on missile defences to one allowing some research in return for a commitment to maintain the ABM Treaty for another 15–20 years. This proposal and subsequent variants met, however, with the unvarying reply that SDI was not a bargaining chip. At length, Gorbachev, faced with the prospect of yet another summit without an arms-control agreement, proposed a pre-summit preparatory meeting to take place in October 1986, in the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik. Reagan agreed.

Nothing prepared the US participants, or indeed the world, for what happened at Reykjavik. According to subsequent, frequently confused accounts, Gorbachev arrived with a sheaf of detailed proposals, some of them involving significant Soviet concessions. Two intense days of meetings followed; at times Gorbachev and Reagan alone, at times joined by Shultz and Soviet Minister for Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze; a marathon meeting of experts went through the night. At times it seemed each side was intent on outbidding the other; by the end they had reached agreement on a broad range of nuclear arms control. On strategic nuclear weapons, they agreed that over a five-year period the number of warheads would be cut by 50% to 6,000; heavy missiles would also be halved. As to what would happen in the second five years, Shultz suggested elimination of all ballistic missiles and Gorbachev countered with an offer to do away with all strategic nuclear weapons – whereupon Reagan proposed eliminating all nuclear weapons. On INF, it was agreed that within a global limit of 100, all INF should be withdrawn from Europe, with American deployments restricted to the US and Soviet deployments restricted to Asia. They also agreed to a phased reduction of nuclear testing, working towards an ultimate cessation.

At Reykjavik, the nuclear disarmer in Reagan was swept along by Gorbachev – until, at the eleventh hour, this far-reaching, indeed

breathhtaking series of proposals fell apart over SDI. Gorbachev made the whole package conditional on the strict interpretation of the ABM Treaty, with no testing or development, and research confined to the laboratory. Reagan held fast to the broad interpretation. Lacking agreement on this single point, the summit broke up amid mutual recrimination. The world was treated to the extraordinary spectacle of the leadership of the two superpowers looking grim and ashen-faced – and for the most part, the world breathed a sigh of relief. Few of our allies thought abolishing nuclear weapons or even ballistic missiles was a good idea, and they were stunned at Reagan’s apparent readiness to give them up.

Only the INF agreement survived the wreckage of Reykjavik. The 127-page treaty signed by the two leaders at the December 1987 Washington Summit provided for the elimination over a three-year period of an entire class of weapons – all intermediate and short-range ground-launched missiles between the ranges of 500 and 5,500km. True to Reagan’s injunction, ‘trust but verify’, and in conformity with his administration’s obsession with verification, the treaty also established one of the most detailed and intrusive verification regimes ever devised. A large infrastructure came into being to implement the treaty: nuclear risk reduction centres in Moscow and Washington DC to handle notifications as well as the on-site inspection agency to conduct inspections.

The INF Treaty is rightly regarded as a significant arms-control treaty. Unique in that it eliminated a whole class of weapons, it was in many ways a nuclear disarmer’s dream. And it perfectly expressed the commonality of the Reagan–Gorbachev approach to nuclear weapons.

The treaty was innocent of strategic purpose, however, and indeed

## *The INF Treaty was innocent of strategic purpose*

aroused little enthusiasm among European allies and strategists who worried about its decoupling effects.

But the world had moved beyond such issues. In the US, the *Pershing* and cruise missiles had few die-hard defenders: the decision to deploy them had from the outset been more a response to a political problem than to any perceived military need, as well as a source of transatlantic tension for the better part of a decade. From the US point of view, the *Pershings* and

GLCMs were eminently expendable. The only dissent came from hard-liners who thought any arms-control agreement a mistake.

START was another matter – a different order of magnitude – as Admiral William Crowe, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed. Strategic weapons were the family jewels. Indeed, some suspected that the hard-liners had been willing to throw INF as a bone to the arms controllers in order to circle the wagons around SDI and

START. The obstacles to completing a START agreement were many and complex; the Reagan presidency was by this point weakened by the Iran-Contra scandal and the two sides were unable to come to closure before Reagan left office. And by that time, SDI, still largely on the drawing board, had long since ceased to terrify the Soviets.

### **Bush and the end of the Cold War**

It was thus left to the first Bush administration to conclude both START I and START II. The Bush administration was initially extremely cautious about Gorbachev – it is astonishing to recall that Reagan was felt by many in his own party to have gone soft on the Soviet leader – but moved decisively after a few months to engage him. In any event, during the summer and autumn of 1989, the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe began to fall apart. By the time President George H. W. Bush and Gorbachev met in December 1989, on stormy seas in Malta, the Berlin Wall had come down and communist regimes had fallen throughout Eastern Europe. From then on, events moved rapidly. An agreement on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) became for the first time a real possibility and was signed a year later on 19 November 1990. A START agreement became a major objective of both sides, though it was to take another year and a half. Progress was slowed, among other things, by hard-line opposition to Gorbachev in Russia, which caused him for a time to move sharply to the right. The Gulf War intervened. However, the START I Treaty was finally signed at a Bush–Gorbachev Summit on 31 July 1991. A scant six weeks later, hard-liners staged a coup against Gorbachev; its failure brought Boris Yeltsin to power and led in December to the dissolution of the Soviet Union into 15 constituent republics. Nonetheless, the goal of a follow-on treaty was pursued and START II was signed in January 1993, in the closing days of the Bush administration.

The START treaties achieved goals that the US had been pursuing for nearly 20 years. START I provided for reductions over a seven-year period in the total number of deployed strategic warheads to 6,000, deployed on no more than 1,600 delivery vehicles. The number of warheads deployed on ICBMs and SLBMs was limited to 4,900. The throw-weight dragon was wounded if not slain: the Russians agreed to a 50% cut in their heavy missiles, the SS-18s, as well as a 46% reduction in throw-weight. The effect was greatly to diminish, if not totally to eliminate, the threat of a first strike. The treaty, which ran to 280 pages, incorporated an extensive and intrusive verification regime modelled largely on the INF Treaty. START II carried the process further with additional reductions down to 3,500 deployed warheads; more

significantly, it provided for the elimination of all MIRVed ICBMs and the elimination of all heavy ICBMs. The dragon, it seemed, was now slain.

The Conventional Forces in Europe agreement also achieved objectives that for years had seemed beyond reach. Since 1972, NATO countries had been seeking to negotiate with the Warsaw Pact an agreement to reduce conventional forces in Europe, in the so-called Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction talks. Given the Warsaw Pact's huge numerical advantage in men and equipment, concluding an agreement that reduced the disparity on terms acceptable to NATO had long been dismissed as a vain quest. Gorbachev's willingness to consider radical solutions involving disproportionate Soviet reductions, together with the break-up of the Soviet empire, which made the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe only a matter of time, brought this goal, too, within reach. Conducted as the Warsaw Pact was dissolving and the reunification of Germany proceeding apace, no negotiation had to adapt its original assumptions and structures so quickly or so repeatedly. But the results were far-reaching. The agreement provided for a 70% reduction in six categories of equipment, including tanks, armoured combat vehicles, artillery and aircraft. To date, nearly 60,000 pieces of equipment have been destroyed in the reductions area.

Thus, by the early 1990s, the US and the West appeared to have achieved their long-standing arms-control goals. But as Russia continued along its tumultuous path to modernity, the threat to which these goals responded was ceasing to exist. Real arms control and significant reductions became possible, it seemed, only when they were no longer necessary. There were still thousands of deployed weapons on each side, but little remained of the tense nuclear stand-off of the Cold War. Some still worried about a resurgent Soviet threat, but the survivability of the US land-based force and scenarios of decapitating first strikes were hardly uppermost in anyone's mind.

Were, then, the agreements necessary? Many of the reductions would have happened anyway, particularly in conventional forces, but it mattered a great deal that they took place within a treaty framework. In a period marked by uncertainty, tension and enormous potential for instability – especially within the former Soviet Union – the treaties created a structured and predictable environment. The obligatory inspections, notifications and data exchanges ensured transparency, visibility and physical access for the reduction and post-reduction process. The requirement that weapons be physically destroyed ensured that reductions were irreversible. The treaties provided a politically acceptable framework which both accommodated and facilitated the military decline of the Soviet Union and its withdrawal from Eastern

Europe. They served as reassuring tools for the orderly management of a potentially disorderly transition. Finally, START I provided a vehicle for resolving the sensitive and potentially dangerous problem of the denuclearisation of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, these three former Soviet republics had been left with Soviet strategic nuclear weapons on their territory. After a difficult and complex negotiation, they agreed to remove the nuclear weapons and accede to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as non-nuclear states; thereafter, they were brought into the START I treaty by the Lisbon Protocol of May 1992.

The treaties were indispensable instruments for managing the end of the Cold War, but from this period on, the story of arms control shifts away from formal agreements. There is less concern with the strategic balance than with the safety and control of nuclear weapons and fissile material. In the wake of the 1991 coup, the US and Soviet Union undertook a number of parallel, unilateral measures – the so-called Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI) – that did as much or more to dismantle non-strategic forces as START had done for strategic forces. In September 1991, President Bush announced that the US would dismantle or destroy its entire world-wide inventory of ground-launched tactical nuclear weapons and withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from its surface ships and attack submarines. He also announced the de-alerting of US strategic bombers as well as some 450 *Minuteman* and 1,600 *Poseidons* slated for reduction and cancelled among other programmes the MX and *Midgetman*.<sup>12</sup> On 2 October 1991, Gorbachev pledged in response to destroy all warheads for land-based tactical nuclear weapons, to withdraw naval tactical nuclear weapons and to destroy or store their warheads; to de-alert some 500 ICBMs; and to cancel follow-on systems to the SS-25 and SS-24.

Bush was motivated in part by the lack of controls on nuclear weapons in the now-disintegrating Soviet Union. Consequently, the president also proposed bilateral discussions to expand cooperation on nuclear command and control as well as warhead safety and security. But in circumstances where speed was clearly of the essence, Bush was firmly convinced that traditional negotiations in pursuit of a formal agreement would be too slow and cumbersome. The Soviet Nuclear Threat Reduction Act of 1991, or ‘Nunn-Lugar programme’, was similarly motivated by anxiety about ‘loose nukes’. The 1991 legislation has since played an essential role in the on-going dismantlement of Russia’s nuclear arsenal. Enhancing the safety, security and control of nuclear weapons and fissile material in the former Soviet Union remains a top priority; the contribution of what is now known as the Cooperative Threat Reduction programme will continue to be absolutely critical.

### **After the Cold War**

Important and necessary though they were in managing the end of the Cold War, it was not long before the strategic arms-control treaties came to seem less urgent and even somewhat irrelevant. The INF Treaty entered into force promptly in July 1988, but START I did not enter into force until December 1994, three and a half years after signature, primarily because of delays caused by the break-up of the Soviet Union. The delay in START I pushed back START II, which was not ratified until December 1995, in part because of the substantively unrelated legislative hold by Senator Jesse Helms. On the Russian side, the Duma stalled on ratification of START II, because it was widely regarded as disadvantageous to Russia. In 1997, a US–Russian protocol extended the deadline for START II reductions from 2003 to 2007, but then the protocol became tangled in the emerging missile-defence debate because it was tied to the so-called ABM/Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) Demarcation Agreements. Ultimately, the protocol was never submitted for ratification in the US. The Russians did finally ratify the START II agreement (including the protocol) in April 2000 after Putin’s election, but its implementation was conditioned on continued observance of the ABM Treaty, which was already being challenged in the US.

The battles between a Democratic president and a Republican-controlled Senate were one reason for this desultory back and forth in the US, but the deeper reality was that bilateral strategic arms control and the strategic balance did not seem to matter very much any more. To some in the government, the vast infrastructure created to handle inspections and notifications came to seem excessively burdensome. START I alone provided for 82 separate notifications and 12 different kinds of on-site inspections. The various implementation bodies meeting in Geneva all too often spent their time wrangling over minor contested issues. A kind of verification fatigue set in. By the late 1990s the whole structure and concept of bilateral arms control had begun to fray.

More importantly, the broader strategic context was changing rapidly. Increasingly, after the Gulf War, the most urgent danger seemed to stem from the threat of rogue states acquiring nuclear, chemical and biological weapons together with the long-range missiles capable of delivering them. Strategic arms control was still an obligatory item on the US–Russian agenda during the 1990s, but it was not a burning issue for either President Bill Clinton or President Boris Yeltsin. Without pressure from the top, negotiations languished. More fundamentally, there was no effort to rethink how the US could deal with the Russians on strategic issues.

Instead, START III talks were conducted as a reprise of START II, but with lower numbers. Although a Bush administration review had

removed thousands of targets from the single integrated operating plan (SIOP) in 1991, the nuclear posture review of 1994 left the foundations of nuclear deterrence and targeting assumptions pretty much as they had existed during the Cold War – with the US still ready, as one commentator put it, ‘to fight Russia in the instant, massive Cold War way’.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, it was the re-emergence of the missile-defence debate that finally re-energised arms-control negotiations. The Bush administration had cut back substantially on the funding and scope for SDI. Clinton went further, setting national missile defence to one side while concentrating on the development of TMD and reaffirming his commitment to the traditional interpretation of the ABM Treaty.

The Demarcation Agreement, signed by the US and Russia in 1997 after four years of negotiations, had sought to define boundaries between permitted TMD and systems prohibited by the ABM Treaty. But throughout the decade, national missile defence – now conceived of as a limited defence against rogue states rather than a global shield against Soviet missiles – continued to be the subject of highly contentious debate. After the 1994 elections, the Clinton administration came under increasing pressure from a Republican Congress to develop a national missile defence, even if the price of such a move was withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. Annual battles took place over resolutions and funding of national missile defence, and the Demarcation Agreement was heavily criticised. Finally, two events in 1998 catapulted missile defence to the top of everyone’s agenda: the warning in the so-called Rumsfeld Commission report that a missile threat to the US from rogue states was likely to emerge sooner than CIA estimates had predicted; and the unanticipated launch of the *Taepo-dong I*, a crude, three-stage North Korean missile. Consequently, a Senate resolution instructing the administration to move ahead with plans for a national missile defence passed with only four dissenting votes.<sup>14</sup>

Political emotions and pressures subsequently overwhelmed the debate. There was little rational discussion of key issues, such as the urgency of the weapons-of-mass-destruction (WMD) threat and the related question of whether it was time to rethink the US commitment to the ABM Treaty. The Clinton administration faced immense pressure to do something, but remained only half convinced that national missile defence made sense. It consequently fudged the issue, coming up with a deployment plan that responded to congressional pressures, but sought to preserve the ABM Treaty by renegotiating some of its provisions. The Clinton administration never faced up to the fact that missile defence could not really be squared with the ABM Treaty. Still less did it question the treaty’s continued rationale or question whether the whole US–Soviet

strategic arms-control structure, of which the ABM Treaty was the centrepiece, did not need to be rethought in a post-Cold War world. The administration's failure to address these sensitive points was in some sense understandable, for the missile-defence programme and the proposal to amend the ABM Treaty provoked a diplomatic furore from the Russians, Chinese and Europeans. The Russians threatened dire if unspecified countermeasures. Unable to obtain Russian agreement to amend the treaty and aided by the continuing technical difficulties of the missile-defence testing programme, Clinton ended by kicking the decision down the road into the next administration.

The second Bush administration did tackle the issue with determination and dispatch. It can be argued that it was not necessary to exit the ABM Treaty so abruptly, but, less plausibly, that it was not the right time to rethink some of the premises of US–Russian strategic arms control, including the real relevance of the ABM Treaty as opposed to its totemic value. As noted at the outset, however, the new strategic context after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 helped to contain the negative fall-out of President Bush's decision, particularly from Russia.

Putin's price was a new, legally binding reductions agreement. Although administration hard-liners bitterly resisted the very idea of a treaty, President Bush proved a man of his word and the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), also known as the Moscow Treaty, was duly signed in May 2002 and ratified by the US in March 2003. This two-page agreement however, does little more than record the commitment of each side to reduce its forces by 2012 to between 1,700

and 2,200 operationally deployed warheads. The treaty makes no reference to the US intention to reduce to 3,800 deployed warheads by 2007, as laid out in the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, making it compatible with the firmly held belief of the Bush administration that the US needs to retain maximum flexibility in structuring its strategic forces.

SORT is probably the last treaty of its kind. INF reductions were completed in 1991 and the verification regime terminated in 2002, 13 years after the treaty first entered into force. START I reductions have been completed and the START I verification regime, with its inspection and notification provisions, will remain in force until 2009. Whether it will be renewed, possibly in some streamlined form, as many advocate, remains very much open to question. START II was however allowed to lapse and with it – ironically – the ban on MIRVed ICBMs and the commitment to destroy the SS-18s. At last report, the Russians had decided to extend

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reductions  
agreement*

the service life of the SS-18s until 2015. The dragon was to be allowed to live after all, but it turned out that no-one was afraid of it.

President Bush followed through on his promise to withdraw from the ABM Treaty; he was less successful in bringing about the fundamental changes in American nuclear posture he had heralded in his April 2000 speech. The figure of 2,200 deployed warheads was in the same range agreed to by the US and Russia in 1997.<sup>15</sup> The irrelevance of Mutual Assured Destruction and the end of an adversarial relationship with Russia were among the stated reasons for moving beyond the ABM Treaty, but the maintenance of over 2,000 US warheads does not quite square with these assertions. The concept of a 'balance of terror' seems grotesquely inappropriate to the relationship the US has with Russia today; yet it is hard to explain the need for 2,200 US strategic weapons except in relation to the size of the Russian strategic force and continued scenarios of large-scale attacks against Russia. Logic has never been the strong point of US nuclear strategy.

SORT fits the needs of the time but, true to form, the Bush administration has thrown the baby out with the bath water. With the ABM Treaty out of the way, the US has clearly lost interest in any residual nuclear dialogue with Russia, although such a dialogue remains of interest to the Russians and there is no lack of subjects to be discussed. Two working groups established at the 2002 Putin–Bush summit to deal with verification and missile-defence cooperation continue to meet, but only desultorily. The establishment of a shared early-warning centre in Moscow, as agreed to by Clinton and Putin, is still worthwhile, because of the continued degradation of Russian command and control, but it has been delayed by an unresolved dispute over taxes and liabilities and the absence of any political push to break the impasse. Cooperative Threat Reduction, in turn, has had less than ringing support from the Bush administration, while other issues, such as warhead transparency or tactical nuclear weapons (of interest to the US military and our allies), elicit little enthusiasm in Washington.

### **Is there a future for arms control?**

As strategic arms control passes into history, it seems natural to ask what relevance – if any – the Cold War experience has for arms control today. What currently remains of arms control is a very different animal from the Cold War variant. It is unlikely ever again to be so central a preoccupation of US foreign policy. Today, halting or reversing the proliferation of WMD into the hands of rogue states has become the top priority for US national security policy. This priority has only a modest arms-control dimension, rooted in three multilateral treaties: the Nuclear

*But, in the real world, the habits of cooperation still matter*

Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968), the Biological Weapons Convention (1975) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (1993). The non-proliferation regimes have never depended exclusively on formal agreements, and over the years, the treaties have been supplemented by

export control and suppliers regimes, such as the Australia Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime and the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

What these regimes have in common with strategic arms control is that they cannot succeed where politics has failed. It is fashionable in certain quarters to pour scorn on the Non-Proliferation Treaty or the Biological Weapons Convention because they have not stopped rogue state signatories from violating them. Treaties are powerless to deter determined cheaters, in part because they lack enforceable sanctions for violations. For that reason, the response to violations will necessarily lie in political or military action by the international community or individual states outside the treaty or regime.

What this tells us is not that arms control does not work, but rather, that it only works if the politics are right. Both Germany and Japan, for example, are technologically capable of developing nuclear weapons, but have adhered to the Non-Proliferation Treaty in part because their security was guaranteed by another nuclear power. Argentina and Brazil renounced the nuclear option because they faced no threat from a nuclear power. Conversely, arms-control regimes will not be effective if their prohibitions run counter to a perceived vital national security interest. India, for example, elected to develop nuclear weapons when it lost its Soviet protector at the end of the Cold War but still faced a nuclear-armed adversary in China.

The principal contribution of arms control today lies in the normative framework it helps to maintain. Defining rules about what is broadly acceptable to the international community remains essential to defining the kind of international order we wish to maintain. Even if the rules on their own are insufficient to maintain that order, they remain an important tool for combating proliferation. Certainly, the task would be more difficult without them. The Non-Proliferation Treaty has not been an unqualified success, but the proposition that the world should have as few nuclear-weapon states as possible remains one to which the vast majority of countries in the world continues to subscribe. It is clearly in the United States' interest that this should continue to be the case. Similarly, the chemical and biological weapons conventions have placed the production and possession of biological or chemical weapons beyond

the pale. Norms are an important tool of US soft power and surely no country has a greater interest than America does in upholding them, strengthening the institutions that sustain them and giving them the widest possible applicability. If the US absents itself from the process, the result will be a weakening of the norms. In today's world, as during the Cold War, it is politics that determines how much arms control can accomplish. Arms control by itself will never be – and has never been – the whole answer, but we would be ill-advised to neglect the modest contribution it can make. This seems an obvious point except perhaps in the artificial Hobbesian construct where some would take us. But, in the real world, the habits of cooperation still matter.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Russians retain their system (and its nuclear armed missiles) around Moscow to this day. The US site at Grand Forks, North Dakota, was deactivated in 1976 after a few months as it was found not to be cost effective.
- <sup>2</sup> McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*. (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 550.
- <sup>3</sup> Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*, (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1994), pp. 196–197. Also, Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown & Co., 1979), p. 1239.
- <sup>4</sup> Henry Kissinger, quoted in Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk. The Story of the First Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 122.
- <sup>5</sup> Charles Tyroler (ed.), *Committee on the Present Danger. Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger*, (Washington DC: Pergamon-Brasseys, 1984).
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, Richard Pipes, 'Why the Soviet Union Thinks it Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War', *Commentary*, 64 (July 1977), pp. 21–34.
- <sup>7</sup> 'President's Commission on Strategic Forces: hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-eighth Congress, first session, on the arms control and foreign policy implications of the Scowcroft Commission Report', 6 April 1983. (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983).
- <sup>8</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- <sup>9</sup> Strobe Talbott, *Deadly Gambits: The Reagan Administration and Stalemate in Nuclear Arms Control* (New York: Knopf, 1984).
- <sup>10</sup> The US position was announced in Reagan's 9 May 1982 speech at Eureka College.
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*, p. 194.
- <sup>12</sup> Under President George Bush the total US nuclear stockpile was reduced by 59% from its 1988 level; tactical nuclear weapons were reduced by 90%. By 1993, no nuclear weapons were targeted at Russia. Janne E. Nolan, *An Elusive Consensus: Nuclear Weapons and American Security After the Cold War*, (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 1999), p. 31.
- <sup>13</sup> *Washington Post* columnist Stephen Rosenfeld, quoted in Nolan, *An Elusive Consensus*, p. 61.
- <sup>14</sup> Donald H. Rumsfeld *et al.*, 'Executive Summary of the Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States', 15 July 1998.
- <sup>15</sup> The figure agreed to at the Helsinki Summit was between 2,000 and 2,500.