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SALT: A Bankrupt Process

By ROBERT L. BARTLEY

In the strategic arms negotiations, the present moment is heavy with déjà vu. Isn't this where I came in ten years ago?

Just before winging off for today's summit with Soviet Chairman Brezhnev, President Carter approved development of the MX missile. The new \$30 billion system is intended to solve the problem of "Minuteman vulnerability." With high yields and improving accuracies, by about 1982 Soviet missiles will be able to conduct a first strike destroying all of our land-based Minuteman missiles.

As Defense Secretary Brown puts it, "The Soviets continue with a policy of building forces that could be used in a preemptive counterforce mode." The new MX missiles are to be based in a 20-mile trench so the Soviets won't know precisely where to attack, and the administration believes they will lick the "Minuteman vulnerability" problem when they are deployed in 1989.

Back in 1969, the big concern of strategic planners was something then called "Minuteman vulnerability." The huge size of Soviet missiles suggested that Minuteman would eventually become vulnerable. As Defense Secretary Laird put it in a then-controversial statement, "With their large tonnage warheads, they are going for a first-strike capability—there is no question about that." As a response President Nixon proposed the \$10.3 billion Safeguard system, an anti-missile system designed to shoot down incoming ballistic missiles around Minuteman sites.

Intended for deployment in 1977 or 1978, Safeguard squeaked through the Senate by a 50-50 tie vote in August 1969. That November American and Soviet diplomats clinked champagne glasses in Helsinki at the first Strategic Arms Limitations Talks, opening an era of negotiation President Nixon proclaimed "most momentous."

Ten years of SALT, then, have done nothing to solve our most pressing strategic weapons concern. Indeed, SALT has prevented the response that was approved and funded back in 1969 and that would have been available today. While not emerging quite as soon as some pessimists predicted, the Minuteman vulnerability problem was correctly identified by ABM proponents ten years ago. Now the administration proposes to solve it with a system that—if you choose to believe Mr. Carter's MX, unlike Mr. Nixon's Safeguard, will in the end actually be built—will be available in 1989, ten years from now and seven or so years after Minuteman becomes vulnerable.

Period of Arms Build-Ups

On the Soviet side, meanwhile, the SALT era has become one of history's great arms build-ups. Between 1969 and 1978, U.S. strategic force levels were static at 1,054 land-based missiles and 656 submarine-launched missiles—though more multiple warheads were installed on these launchers. Over the same time, the Soviets increased their land-based force to 1,400 from 1,028, and their sea-based launchers to 1,015 from 196. In conventional arms, U.S. manpower shrank, while the Soviets expanded their armies and supplied them with large numbers of tanks, artillery tubes and other arms.

This increased military clout already seems to be casting a political shadow. The Czech coup took place in 1948 and the Nationalist Chinese collapsed in 1949; until the fall of Saigon in 1975, the only successful Communist expansion were the victories of Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam and Fidel Castro in Cuba. In the last four years, Soviet-allied Marxist governments have been established by force of arms in seven nations: South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and South Yemen.

Little wonder that new skepticism abounds about both SALT and detente; Tuesday night Senator Henry Jackson went so far as to charge a policy of "appeasement." Some caveats of course have to be made: American strategic forces have been improved by both the multiple warheads and the new Trident submarine. And the military and diplomatic weaknesses of the last decade can be traced to the general post-Vietnam disillusionment.

Clearly, though, the high hopes of SALT

have been dashed. The agreements have not slowed the Soviet build-up in any perceptible way; certainly we have not been able to find a negotiated solution to Minuteman vulnerability. By contrast, there is plenty of reason to believe that the SALT process has subtly but effectively curtailed American strategic programs. The dynamic is this: arms control mutilates the best options, and the Budget Bureau moves in to kill off the cripples.

This can perhaps be best grasped through the Minuteman vulnerability issue.

In military history there are a limited number of ways to deal with vulnerabilities. You can plan an active defense—in this case an ABM. You can fortify—but missile silos have already been hardened about as much as they can be. Or you can conceal—as in the MX trench.

Active defense of missile sites should not in theory interfere with disarmament efforts; by reducing the advantages of a first-strike it promotes "strategic stability" and reduces the likelihood of war. But the ABM was an anathema to arms control advocates because they feared it would be expanded to defend cities as well as missiles. This would interfere with mutual assured destruction (MAD), a doctrine that holds that war can be prevented by making sure that if it happens both societies would be destroyed.

Between the influence of the MAD doctrine on the U.S. side and the understandable Soviet desire to curtail American advantages in anti-missile technology, SALT-I sharply restricted ABMs. It did bow to the logic of active defense of missiles by allowing each side one ABM site for missile defense. However, to prevent expansion, this system was limited to 100 interceptor missiles. So American budget guardians asked what was the sense of spending a lot of money on a system that could be defeated simply by sending 101 Soviet warheads. The U.S. ABM site in Grand Forks, N. Dak., was opened in 1975 and closed one month later.

Perhaps worse, U.S. research on active defense has slowed drastically; SALT-I bans not-yet invented ABMs based on "exotic physical principles." Ironically, information-processing technology now makes it possible to envision ABMs without nuclear warheads. A proposed Porcupine system, for example, would attack incoming missiles with a shotgun burst of one-pound metal darts. But no one pushes this system vigorously, because while it does not clearly violate the disarmament treaty someone will charge that it does.

With active defense ruled out by the interaction of arms control and the Budget Bureau, and with the possibilities of hardening about exhausted, you are left with concealment. But easily concealed mobile missiles are an arms control problem; the other side can't count them to check for cheating, or "verify" the treaty. Indeed, this concern led the U.S. to issue a "unilateral declaration" against deployment of mobile missiles when SALT-I was signed. This did not stop Soviet development of the mobile SS-16, but it did inhibit U.S. thinking about mobility. It also guaranteed Soviet planners the U.S. would have neither active defense nor concealment, making a sure thing out of heavy investment in first-strike missiles.

With such Soviet missiles coming on line, U.S. planners are trying to square the circle with a mobile missile that (1) can be concealed to avoid attack, (2) can be seen to permit verification and (3) will pass budget muster. Not surprisingly, the options look like something from Rube Goldberg.

The Air Force wanted the "shell game," a series of vertical shelters with one real missile and several dummies, which had to have the same shape, weight and radiation characteristics as the real one. This was deemed unverifiable.

So Mr. Carter opted for the MX in the "trench." The notion was to move the mis-

sile up and down a trench; the Soviets could see there was only one, but would not know where it was at any minute. Unhappily, it was discovered that a trench is an excellent conductor of blast waves, so that a hit anywhere on a 20 mile trench would get the missile wherever it was.

Series of Shelters

So the MX trench will have a series of shelters, or hard points, with the missile shuffled among them. But will shelters work if they're uncovered? And if you cover them how do you allow verification? This issue has been "deferred" in Mr. Carter's "decision" to proceed with "development." Also, the MX will weigh 95 tons, and moving it will create significant seismic effects theoretically subject to detection.

In all, Mr. Carter's MX proposal does not look like the kind of a system that will withstand the cost-effectiveness scrutiny that killed the one-site Safeguard, the B-1 bomber, the B-70 before it, and earlier versions of the MX that would have been available sooner. And despite the SALT-II provision explicitly allowing one new missile on each side, the Soviets have already started a propaganda campaign against the MX like the one against the neutron bomb.

The arms control-Budget Bureau dynamic is certain to continue as SALT-III is negotiated. Any money spent on MX may be "wasted" if SALT-III terms ban mobile missiles in an extension of the three-year protocol in SALT-II. Even more importantly, the same ambiguity will cloud the U.S. cruise missile, where the U.S. now holds a technological lead comparable to its ABM lead in 1969.

In fact, the dynamic has already delayed deployment of ground and sea launched versions of the cruise missile by two years. President Carter killed funds to buy these weapons in fiscal 1979 after reading Budget Bureau advice: "Defer 1979 procurement of both the anti-ship and land-attack sea-launched cruise missile in view of (a) uncertainty as to how SALT protocol provision affecting these systems will be reflected in future agreements. . . ." Also, provisions of the treaty Mr. Carter signs Monday will effectively preclude air-based cruise missiles on short take-off and landing aircraft, a promising basing mode in Europe.

From the Soviet viewpoint, SALT must seem an excellent way to delay, grind down and eventually kill the most promising U.S. weapons developments. It has kept the U.S. from exploiting its strong card of technology, while the Soviets have rolled along with their strong card of churning out masses of weapons. It has been a lever through which they have manipulated our procurement decisions.

Few people, of course, would want to give up even exploring the possibilities of sound arms agreements. But it should be clear by now that we are in a dynamic never contemplated back in 1969. Experience suggests that it is not easy, and may not ultimately be possible, to arrive at sound agreements with a nation that is totalitarian, a closed society and interested enough in armies to spend a seventh of its entire output on them. Without some kind of new start to break the current dynamic, the SALT process seems to result in one-sided restraint.

Anyone who thinks that the current process reduces the chance of war ought to think a bit about what will in the end probably be done about Minuteman vulnerability. Within the past few weeks, Secretary Brown said that in any attack on Minuteman the Russians "would face a considerable risk that we could launch all or part of our ICBMs before they could be destroyed." Secretary of State Vance echoed the idea: "One should not make the assumption that if such an attack were coming in, and we could pick that up very clearly, that we would leave the missile in the hole."

'Launch on Warning'

In strategic jargon this is called "launch on warning." We have 15 to 30 minutes warning of incoming missiles, and systems could be built to fire the Minuteman in that interval. It does not take much reflection to see that such a doctrine would vastly increase the chances of a nuclear exchange by accident or misunderstanding, and most analysts have envisioned it as the ultimate in unstable strategic environments. Yet to judge by the latest statements, it is probably where we are headed after 1982.

We would not be talking about launch on warning if Safeguard or some evolutionary descendant of it were now being deployed. Without the guarantees of American vulnerability in SALT-I, it is even conceivable that the Soviets would have concluded that a big fleet of first-strike missiles was not worth the money. Without SALT the Minuteman vulnerability problem would not exist, and we would not be headed toward a hairtrigger nuclear environment by 1982. If the champagne glasses had never clinked at Helsinki, the world would be a safer place.

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