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OPINION

Why US should continue to adhere to SALT II

By Lee H. Hamilton

THE future of the unratified SALT II Treaty, which has limited United States and Soviet nuclear forces since 1979, is unclear. The Reagan administration is divided. Some officials want to scrap SALT II, but the President announced last June that the US would follow a "no undercut" policy of adhering to treaty limits so long as the Soviet Union "exercises comparable restraint." This is still official policy.

The President also said that the US would study "proportionate responses" to what it views as the military consequences of Soviet violations of arms agreements. With the expiration of SALT II on Dec. 31, 1985, the US may decide to pursue arms programs that breach treaty limits. Such a decision could end all restraints on US and Soviet nuclear forces.

There are several reasons the US should continue to adhere to the terms of SALT II. This conclusion is shared by a recent study by the Arms Control Association, "Countdown on SALT II."

First, SALT II establishes equal limits on bombers and missiles and freezes the number of allowed warheads per missile. It establishes restrictive sublimits on Soviet land-based missiles, which concern the US the most. Every time the Soviets introduce a new missile, they are obligated under SALT to retire one as well. According to the Arms Control Association, the Soviet Union removed 1,007 land-based missiles and 233 sea-based missiles from its active force and dismantled 13 submarines during 1972-85 to comply with SALT II limits. Past Soviet practices suggest that without SALT II much of this hardware would still be in operation.

Second, SALT II is in the US interests because Soviet missile production lines remain open. According to open testimony by the Central Intelligence Agency, the Soviets could add 12,000 new warheads by the mid-1990s — more than doubling their present force — if they broke out of SALT II. The Soviets could also put up to 20 or 30

warheads on each "heavy" missile, giving them a much greater capacity to attack US targets. It is unlikely that the US could keep pace without enormous spending increases.

Third, the end of SALT II and a renewed missile race would likely eliminate the possibility of developing a successful US space-based missile defense. This is the conclusion of the congressional Office of Technology Assessment. The Reagan administration implicitly acknowledges this in its proposal for deep missile cuts as part of its proposal for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Without missile limits, SDI cannot work; without SALT II there would be none.

Fourth, the end of SALT II would free the Soviets to

adopt camouflage and deception techniques, now prohibited under SALT, to hide military activities.

Finally, serious political consequences are likely if SALT II is abandoned. The Geneva talks would suffer a big setback. So would the broader US-Soviet relationship. The end of SALT II would be deeply divisive in Congress and would lead to serious differences within NATO, strengthening Soviet efforts to split the alliance.

The crux of the argument against SALT II focuses on alleged Soviet violations of the treaty. First, the US contends that the Soviets have introduced two new types of land-based missiles, the SS-24 and SS-25, whereas SALT II permits only one. The Soviets declare that the SS-25 is a permitted modernization of the SS-13. The US disputes this, charging that the Soviets have violated SALT II by concealing SS-25 tests. This question is unresolved.

Second, the US accuses the Soviets of encoding missile test-flight data necessary for verification purposes. This charge is certainly true, but the US has refused to specify the missile test data it needs for verification, fearing possible compromise of intelligence sources and methods. This violation is, therefore, less than clear cut.

Third, a new US charge is that the Soviets have deployed launchers in excess of SALT II limits. Others question this, since the US has delayed working out agreed procedures under SALT II for dismantling Soviet bombers. A further US charge, concerning the banned SS-16 missile, has been downgraded in view of Soviet steps that seem to have resolved the issue.

It is my belief that the Soviets have pushed the SALT II Treaty to the limit. Charges of Soviet noncompliance are serious matters concerning gray areas of treaty interpretation, but they do not constitute massive violations that suggest a Soviet effort to break out of the treaty. Our response should not be to renounce SALT II but to draft more careful treaty language in the future and to press our present concerns through the private diplomatic channels of the Standing Consultative Commission created for this purpose. We should pursue our complaints in a manner that keeps the treaty intact. Compliance issues must be handled with accuracy and care, because, if exaggerated, they will destroy any prospects for a new agreement and undermine all existing agreements.

Sticking with SALT II serves US interests, as the current debate demonstrates. Without SALT II, we are likely to experience an accelerated arms race, greater uncertainty about Soviet intentions, and an escalation of tension between the superpowers. We will be less secure. With SALT II, we will be able to preserve important constraints on Soviet weapons, improve our ability to resolve questions about Soviet compliance, and increase prospects for future arms agreements at Geneva. Few choices are so clear cut.

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