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Arms Control and Soviet Grand Strategy

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Soviet behavior indicates that they view arms control as an important element of security policy and military strategy. As the Soviets developed nuclear weapons in the period immediately following World War II, they sought to limit through arms control the advantages the United States derived from its nuclear monopoly. This approach was evident in the Soviet reactions to the Baruch Plan and Atoms for Peace. Although there were U.S.-USSR agreements in the 1960s, they were peripheral to the U.S.-USSR strategic relationship. Only with SALT I and II did the Soviets show a desire for partial measures that were central to the relationship, and a key Soviet objective was achieving and securing parity with the U.S. If the Soviets were ever content with parity, it would appear that they are so no longer. They have continued to build up theater and strategic nuclear forces, while continuing to develop active and passive strategic defenses. It may be that the Soviets believe that strategic advantages obtained only recently and with difficulty are once again threatened. The Soviets undoubtedly had clear military-strategic objectives in their recent INF and START proposals, and whatever their prospects for success, the Soviet Union has not given up on using the ongoing negotiations, and the publicity surrounding them, to obtain political and propaganda advantages.
ABSTRACT

This paper presents the relationship between Soviet approaches to arms control and their security policy and military strategy. Soviet objectives are discussed for the post World War II period, the SALT I and II periods, and the most recent period of INF and START proposals.
ARMS CONTROL AND
SOVIET GRAND STRATEGY

by

Joseph F. Pilat

From the dawn of the atomic age, arms control and disarmament have been accorded a prominent place in Soviet "grand strategy." The revolutionary heritage of the regime has been rejected only in practice; in principle, the Soviets regard pacifism and disarmament, and the public movements they have inspired, as historic allies of socialism. Sounding the "revolutionary" tocsin, and playing to the aspiration of peoples for peace and security, the Soviets have since the late 1940s put forward vague, unverifiable proposals that capture the high moral ground and, irrespective of agreement, offer political advantages. Although there are widely divergent views on the arms control objectives of the Soviet Union, an analysis of past negotiating behavior suggests that the Soviets view arms control as an important, but not the most important, element of security policy and military strategy — as a means of preserving or obtaining relative military advantages, or creating a climate (e.g., "detente") that facilitates achievement of military, political, and economic objectives.1

In the immediate post-war period, the Soviets were driven to develop nuclear weapons, while seeking to limit or eliminate the military-strategic advantages the United States derived from its nuclear monopoly through arms control. The Soviet use and abuse of arms control is evident in Soviet reactions to the principal U.S. arms control initiatives of the 1940s and 1950s, the Baruch Plan and Atoms for Peace. In presenting the Baruch Plan before the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC) on June 14, 1946, the U.S. representative, Bernard Baruch, spoke of the dangers of the atomic age and stated that the world faced a choice between the "quick" and the "dead." He declared that the United States was proposing an International Atomic Energy Development Authority, which was to be entrusted with all phases of the development and use of atomic energy, in order to assure that atomic energy was used for peaceful rather than military purposes.2

The presentation of the U.S. proposal to the UNAEC was followed days later with an address by Andrei Gromyko, then the Soviet Representative to the Commission. He did not directly criticize the Baruch Plan, offering instead a draft convention, the object of which would be "the prohibition of the production and employment of atomic weapons, the destruction of existing stocks of atomic weapons and the condemnation of all activities undertaken in violation of this convention."3 In Gromyko's view, such a convent might eventually be followed by "other measures aiming at the establishment of methods to ensure the strict observance of the terms and obligations in the ... [proposed] convention, the establishment of a system of control over the observance of the convention and the taking of decisions regarding the sanctions to be applied against the unlawful use of atomic energy."4 Gromyko's speech revealed that the Soviets were unwilling to accept U.S. insistence on international inspection and control of atomic energy to prevent production of atomic weapons; they persisted in the view that a declaration outlawing these weapons was sufficient. The Soviets were also adamantly opposed to the U.S. desire to give the Authority the right to impose sanctions and its intention to permit no recourse to a veto
in the Security Council. Soviet opposition and obstruction in the UNAEC, along the lines put forward in the Gromyko speech, ultimately resulted in the death of the Baruch Plan.

Years after the fate of the Baruch Plan had become evident, President Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace proposal offered a new approach to nuclear arms control and disarmament. Eisenhower's proposal was put forward in an address to the UN General Assembly on December 8, 1953, at a time of deep concern about nuclear weapons. It sought the "reduction or elimination of atomic materials for military purposes." But, it stated: "It is not enough to take this weapon out of the hands of soldiers. It must be put into the hands of those who will know how to strip its military casing and adapt it to the arts of peace."

With its message of hope, the Atoms for Peace address was received enthusiastically by the world. The Soviet Union would faintly praise the President's vision, while seeking to use his proposal to obtain political and propaganda advantages. The Soviet's initial response concurred with the ideals and hopes presented in the President's speech and agreed in principle to participate in discussions on creating the international atomic energy agency envisioned by Eisenhower. The Soviets questioned whether such an agency, or any other concrete measure proposed in President Eisenhower's address, would serve to bring about the U.S. President's ultimate goals. In this light, the Soviet statement asserted that:

...it means that it is proposed that only "some" small part of the existing stockpiles of atomic materials and of those to be created should be allocated for peaceful purposes. It follows from this that the bulk of atomic materials will continue to be directed to the production of new atomic and hydrogen bombs, and that the full possibility remains for the further accumulation of atomic weapons and the creation of new types of this weapon of still greater destructive power. Consequently, in its present form this proposal in no way ties the hands of the States which are in a position to produce atomic and hydrogen weapons.

Secondly, President Eisenhower's proposal in no way restricts the possibility of using the atomic weapon itself. Acceptance of this proposal in no way restricts an aggressor in the use of the atomic weapon for any purpose or at any time. Consequently this proposal in no way reduces the danger of atomic attack.

On the basis of this line of reasoning, the Soviets concluded that the Atoms for Peace proposal "neither halts the growing production of atomic weapons nor restricts the possibility of their use." They effectively criticized the President's proposal for not being their own proposal for the prohibition of atomic and hydrogen weapons. The Soviets nevertheless sought to use the popularity of Eisenhower's proposal to push their own disarmament program, stating:

Since we are striving to strengthen peace, our tasks cannot permit either the relaxation of vigilance in relation to the danger of atomic war or international sanction of the production of atomic weapons. It is precisely for this reason that it must be recognized that the task of all peace-loving States is not restricted to the allocation for peaceful purposes of a certain small part of atomic materials. Not a certain part, but the whole mass of atomic materials must be directed in its entirety to peaceful purposes, and this would open up unprecedented possibilities for developing industry, agriculture and transport, for applying invaluable atomic discoveries to medicine, for improving technology in many fields of application, and promoting further and greater scientific progress.

It should also be borne in mind that the prohibition of atomic and hydrogen weapons and the use of all atomic materials for peaceful needs of the peoples, displaying due concern for the needs
of the economically more backward areas, would at the same time improve the possibility of agreement on the question of a decisive reduction in conventional armaments.\(^9\)

The U.S.-USSR exchanges on an international agency began in January 1954. By April, in response to an aide-memoire handed to Secretary Dulles from Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, the Soviet position developed. Choosing not to comment on specific U.S. proposals for the Agency put forward in March, the Soviets asserted that the proposed agency would not halt the arms race or hasten disarmament, because the applications of atomic energy for peaceful purposes could be diverted for weapons. They gave considerable attention to their own disarmament proposals, insisting that negotiations on the agency consider their frequently repeated proposal for a great power pledge not to use atomic and hydrogen bombs or other weapons of mass destruction.

Soviet reactions to the Baruch Plan and Atoms for Peace were dictated first and foremost by their nuclear inferiority. Once the Soviets had attained a nuclear capability, they did not desire a disarmament accord that would limit or eliminate their new forces or alter the nuclear path on which they had embarked. They were apparently willing to adapt to Western ideas about arms control, but only in an exceedingly limited manner. They could not accept U.S. initiatives that would have had the effect of perpetuating their inferiority and relegating them to the status of a Eurasian regional power. Their responses were obstructionistic, but they were crafted so as to appear as even more bold and comprehensive than the American proposals of the time. Unverifiable by design, they would not have affected the Soviet drive to attain nuclear parity, or even superiority. They would have forced the dramatic reduction or dismantlement of U.S. strategic and theater nuclear forces, which would have served to blunt the threat of a U.S. nuclear strike against Soviet territory, to shift the balance of forces to the conventional arena where the Soviets enjoyed superiority, and to weaken NATO and other U.S. alliance systems which depended upon U.S. nuclear guarantees.

Until the late 1960s, when parity of strategic nuclear forces was in sight if not yet in place, the Soviets persisted in their approach. While Soviet calls for general and complete disarmament echoed and reechoed through the decades of the 'fifties and 'sixties, by the early to mid 1950s, the Soviets began to propose what some have construed as partial arms control measures. Each in its own way, the Soviet calls for nuclear-weapon-free zones, for no-first-use of nuclear weapons, for European collective security, and for the dissolution of the military alliances, embodied vague and unverifiable provisions, and were seemingly designed to reduce the advantages of U.S. superiority or to resolve the German question, which was central to U.S.-Soviet relations, on terms favorable to the USSR. Their calls for an end to nuclear testing were essentially unverifiable, and were presumably designed to preclude further U.S. weapons development while the Soviets were expanding their own arsenals. Because all of these proposals could be construed as offering the USSR unilateral advantages, they may have been put forward seriously and been acceptable to the Soviets had the United States agreed to their terms. But their purpose may have been merely propagandistic. However this may be, the Soviets were to reach agreements with the United States on certain partial measures during this period that reflected mutual superpower interests or, in some cases, the absence of superpower competition. The Soviets were party to the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963, the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) of 1968.\(^{10}\) These agreed partial measures, along with the “hotline” agreement of 1963, may have defined areas where cooperation was possible. But it is not surprising that they were peripheral, if not wholly unimportant, to the U.S.-USSR strategic relationship, and were recognized as such by the Soviet leadership. In an address to the UNGA on September 27, 1977, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko recalled such measures, stating:

> We do not in the least underestimate the significance of some constraints placed on the arms race in a number of areas in recent years. The Soviet Union has made its contribution, together with other countries, in the preparation and implementation of a whole series of relevant international treaties and agreements. These either curtail the build-up of certain types
of weapons or ban the arms race in certain environments. . . . Nonetheless, in realistic terms very little has been done so far. Actually physical disarmament and the elimination of the material means of warfare have not even been started yet.11

Only with SALT I and SALT II did the Soviets demonstrate a desire for partial measures that were central to the strategic relationship, although they continued to put forward proposals for general and complete disarmament. At the time, despite the invasion of Czechoslovakia, detente was perceived as prospering and culminated in the conclusion of two major agreements on strategic arms limitations in the 1970s. Agreed to in principle at the time of the conclusion of the NPT, the bilateral U.S.-Soviet SALT I negotiations began in 1969. In 1972 the negotiations resulted in the ABM Treaty, which limited defenses against ballistic missiles to two sites of 100 ABM launchers each around each nation’s capital and an ICBM launch site (reduced by a 1974 protocol to one such site), and the Interim Agreement on Strategic Offensive Arms, which effectively froze for five years the number of U.S. and Soviet strategic ballistic missile launchers. With the expiration of the SALT I freeze in five years, the U.S. and USSR resumed negotiations on further strategic arms limitations in 1973. These negotiations led to the preliminary Vladivostok agreement in 1974, which established a limit of 2,400 strategic ballistic missiles, with a sublimit of 1,320 MIRVed ICBMs or SLBMs. And, in 1979, the SALT II agreement followed; it reduced the Vladivostok limits to 2,250 strategic missiles and bombers, with a sublimit of 1,200 MIRVed missiles, no more than 820 of which were to be land-based.

The United States believed that SALT I represented a step toward the stabilization of the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship at a lower level of arms through mutual arms constraints, and expected that each side would respect the principle of mutual vulnerability and thereby not threaten the other’s retaliatory forces. Soviet motives in pursuing the SALT process are debatable. In the Soviet view, however, arms control was bound to detente. The “Basic Principles” of U.S.-Soviet relations agreed in 1972 were, in effect, the Sermon on the Mount for U.S.-Soviet relations in the era of detente. In this document, they outlined a program of peaceful coexistence and equal security in their mutual relations; of broad and purportedly mutually beneficial cooperation in the areas of economics, commerce, science and technology, and culture; and of arms control, disarmament, and the prevention of nuclear war.12 If the basic principles did not clearly enough delineate the relationship between arms control and detente, Soviet leaders continuously returned to this point. According to Gromyko, speaking as the SALT II accord was nearing completion: “It was precisely the atmosphere of detente that made it possible to undertake some major actions with a view to reducing the nuclear threat [i.e., strategic arms limitations].”13 And, from the Soviet perspective, both detente and arms control were seen to be shifting the “correlation of forces” in favor of socialism;14 clearly arms control was seen by the Soviets as a path to better East-West relations — reducing dangers deriving from Sino-American rapprochement; providing greater access to trade, financial credits, and advanced technology; and leading to codification of the status quo in Europe.

It is widely believed that until the late 1960s or early 1970s the Soviets accorded the highest priority to achieving parity in strategic nuclear forces with the United States. This priority, it is argued, precluded Soviet interest in serious arms control negotiations during earlier years, and was the driving force in the SALT process, in which overall strategic parity was codified along with certain areas of Soviet advantage.15 While there is a certain validity in this received wisdom, it would be more correct to state that the Soviet Union was driven to eradicate first the U.S. nuclear monopoly and, then, U.S. nuclear superiority, in the period prior to the late 1960s. During the SALT period, achieving and securing parity was a key Soviet objective. The “Basic Principles” of U.S.-Soviet relations agreed in 1972 that the “prerequisites for maintaining and strengthening peaceful relations between the USA and the USSR are the recognition of the security interests of the Parties based on the principle of equality and the renunciation of the use or threat of force.”16 This recognition of parity was repeated incessantly throughout the SALT period by the Soviets, and was virtually certain to be an element of any U.S.-Soviet joint communique on strategic arms limitation from 1972 to 1979.

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The Soviets were willing to accept arms limitations that did not affect their strategic buildup, but did have the effect of delaying or denying U.S. actions that could have eradicated Soviet advantages and perhaps all of the achievements of earlier decades. This was important, and the Soviets argued their point publicly. A Pravda editorial of February 11, 1975, on the problems encountered in the SALT II negotiations, underscored Soviet concerns about preserving parity. After asserting that the Soviet Union was "consistently and constructively" pursuing an agreement "on the basis of strict observance of the principle of equality and equal security," the editorial pointed out that "[t]he historic course of development has long made untenable the designs to ensure for the United States a military superiority over the USSR. The leaders of the United States themselves were compelled to officially recognize the state of military-strategic equilibrium between the two countries. There is no future in attempts to revive plans of achieving military superiority over the USSR. But they can lead to a new spiral of the arms race, [and] to a greater danger of a nuclear-missile conflict . . ."17 A later Pravda editorial explicitly stated that it was not the "concocted dangers" of Soviet military superiority "that the U.S. fears in reality, but equality, parity; it does not want its [i.e., parity's] preservation, expecting to establish its own military superiority by means of new lunges ahead in the arms race and by putting a brake on the negotiations. It goes without saying that this runs counter to the central principle of equality and equal security of sides agreed by the USSR and the United States. The USSR does not intend to violate it, but it will not allow this principle to be violated by others. Yes, it will not allow this to happen."18

How serious were the stated Soviet concerns? No longer was it likely that the Soviets would have to rely in a conflict on inferior nuclear forces, yet there was the threat of an arms race that could effectively recreate the old inferiority while increasing the prospects of nuclear war. Precluding a costly arms race was a stated Soviet objective throughout the process. But the USSR apparently had more basic objectives. At the onset of the SALT process, the Soviets were particularly interested in halting U.S. ABMs and the MIRVing of its ICBMs; as the negotiations continued other U.S. systems became the focus of Soviet attacks. SALT assured the Soviets that the United States would not be undertaking a massive buildup of offensive forces that would have eroded or eliminated recent Soviet offensive gains; and it delayed and dampened competition in ballistic missile defenses, an area in which the United States had unquestioned superiority. At the same time, SALT fully provided the Soviets with opportunities for expanding and modernizing their offensive forces, and allowing them to preserve their advantage in land-based ICBMs. In addition, the effect of the SALT accords was to put into question the value of U.S. nuclear guarantees and to weaken NATO.

For the Soviets, the advantages offered by the SALT process have to some degree been realized, and hopes for further advances through this route are blocked by what are perceived to be the anti-Soviet attitudes, and the commitment to modernization of strategic and theater nuclear forces in the Reagan Administration. In the Soviet perspective, the Reagan Administration threatened to upset the apple cart of arms control, and create the conditions for an "uncontrolled arms race" — by refusing to accept old agreements, by its reluctance to regard the Soviets as an equal, by seeking "military supremacy" and preparing for "global nuclear war," and by its search for a "position of strength" from which to negotiate in "power diplomacy." The Administration then was seeking to reverse the trends in the "correlation of forces" that had been favoring the Soviets and their "socialist" allies since the late 1960s.19

If the Soviets were ever content with parity, it would appear that they are so no longer. And they may be moving away from the passing interest in partial measures embodied in SALT. It has been argued that since the opening of the 1980s the Soviet Union has sought as its primary objective the preservation of the nuclear balance by denying the United States opportunities to improve its relative position.20 This the USSR has done through positions in the INF and START talks, which began in 1981 and ended when they withdrew in 1983. During this period, however, we may have witnessed the Soviet's last attempt to capitalize on limited measures. The latest Soviet proposals at the nuclear and space talks in Geneva and at the Reykjavik summit have had a more grandiose scope, recalling those of the first post-war decades more than those of the SALT period (during which, however, calls for disarmament continued to be sounded). It might
be argued that this resulted from a Soviet belief that it has achieved those military-strategic objectives that are attainable through arms control. However this may be, the Soviet Union has continued its buildup of theater and strategic nuclear forces, while continuing to develop an expansive system of active and passive strategic defenses and to undertake actions that have been viewed as preparatory to creeping or breaking out of the ABM Treaty with a rapidly deployable network of ABM over the entire territory of the Soviet Union. In this light, it may be that the Soviets believe that strategic advantages obtained only recently and with difficulty are once again threatened.

The Soviets are committed to doing everything they can to prevent the realization of SDI, precisely because they wish to preserve the value of their offensive forces. During the last decade, the USSR has made an impressive investment in extremely capable strategic and theater nuclear systems. These systems are designed to destroy an adversary's military-economic infrastructure; disrupt its system of government and control; and, eliminate its strategic nuclear forces and other military forces, in order to limit damage to the Soviet Union while strengthening and extending Soviet military-political influence. If deployed, strategic defenses, as a direct threat to these systems and objectives, would create significant military-strategic problems for the USSR. At best, defenses of limited effectiveness would decrease Soviet confidence in the outcome of an attack and thereby complicate operations. At worst, effective defense could deny the USSR the ability to destroy a militarily significant portion of the targets to be attacked, which would require alternative methods to destroy U.S. nuclear systems and conduct operations against the territory of the United States and its allies or, less likely, lead to a radical restructuring of Soviet military-strategic objectives.

In the same vein, the Soviets have long expressed concern about U.S. strategic and intermediate-range nuclear force modernization. Both before and after the Reykjavik summit, the USSR has appeared to be using the Geneva talks as a means to delay or preclude not only U.S. defensive but also offensive programs. It is possible that external public pressures or internal bureaucratic pressures would lead the Soviets to agree to an arrangement involving either strategic or theater nuclear forces, or both, if such an agreement was otherwise perceived to be in their national security interest. This may explain the latest Soviet INF proposal, which has apparently been "delinked" (once again) from SDI.

Whatever may occur in the INF negotiations, the Soviets will continue to attack SDI and it is likely that they will continue to use first-strike arguments for this purpose, if not in the negotiations themselves, then in the public debate that surrounds them. The USSR has been developing arguments that highlight possibly destabilizing elements of SDI, and argues that these "defensive" systems could be used offensively to attack targets on the ground. In conjunction with strategic modernization and INF deployments these systems would, they argue, ensure a U.S. first-strike capability. This seems to indicate that they intend to exploit fears of first strike and opposition to SDI within the U.S. to realize their objectives of delaying or denying U.S. nuclear force modernization programs.

These concrete concerns and military-strategic objectives can be discerned in the lofty language and airy call, on January 15, 1986, by Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev for nuclear disarmament by the year 2000, and in later "proposals" embodied in public statements and in the discussions at the Reykjavik summit. These largely distant and vaguely defined proposals show that the Soviets are clearly more interested in furthering Soviet public diplomacy and propaganda than in putting forward negotiable arms control proposals. However, it can be argued that elements of the proposals are serious, albeit limited. Despite continuing controversies and persisting complex questions, there is now a real possibility that an INF agreement will be concluded. Even if no agreement appeared feasible, however, the Soviets would be likely to remain actively engaged in the arms control process.

The Soviets undoubtedly had clear military-strategic objectives in putting forward their recent proposals. However, it is by no means certain that they were sanguine about achieving them. Whatever their prospects for success, it is clear that the Soviet Union has not given up on using the ongoing negotiations, and the publicity surrounding them, to obtain political and propaganda advantages. The most important signal emanating from the recent Soviet disarmament proposals
and the Reykjavik summit, then, may be that in a position of relative strength or weakness, the Soviets perceive arms control as an instrument of Soviet strategic interests, and certainly not as an end in itself. Indeed, if this latest proposal suggests a return to the practices of the past, in which unrealistic and unrealizable strategic positions were the only element of Soviet arms control policy, it could suggest that the conditions which produced the limited SALT agreements in the 1960s were unique and perhaps unrepeatable, and that strategic arms limitations are an historical phenomenon.
FOOTNOTES

1. For a broad and balanced discussion of Soviet negotiating behavior, as well as some insights into Soviet objectives and strategy, in the arms control area, see Leon Sloss and M. Scott Davis, *A Game for High Stakes: Lessons Learned in Negotiating with the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1986).


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


8. Ibid., p. 405.


15. Ibid., p. vii.


20. Ibid., p. vii.
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