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Unappreciated Features of SALT II

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Regrettably, Mr. George Will, ["A Failure to Master SALT,"] has decided to withhold from the SALT debate his very considerable talent for elucidation. He has chosen to parrot the superficial, short-sighted catalog of half-truths and flawed analyses by which many hard-liners are seeking to frighten Americans, defeat SALT and inaugurate a military buildup far beyond our needs.

The proposed SALT agreements are complex, in large part because they address dozens of issues of widely varying importance in which many compromises have been made by both sides. As a consequence, by selecting specific issues and ignoring others, and by focusing on certain items that are not covered and omitting others that are, many convincing cases agaist these agreements can be erected. Mr. Will does not illuminate the issue by taking such an easy course.

Consider his main points. The 250 launchers that SALT II would require the Soviets to give up, while we abandon none, are dismissed as being old and of little value.Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.), among others, has argued sensibly that reductions should begin with the more obsolete weapons. Why not let this apply at the outset? How would Mr. Will have induced the Soviets to bargain away their latest missiles instead?

U.S. throw-weight disadvantages result from different choices both sides made long ago that were legitimized in the interim agreement "freeze" of 1972. A principal task of SALT II has been to remove this freeze so that an equal number of launchers are permitted for each side. If SALT continues, the throw-weight gap will need to be addressed. Thus far it has not been a disadvantage for us. We can unilaterally redress it in large measure by replacing our existing ICBMs with the largest allowed under the terms of the treaty. Instead, the administration is opting for the smaller -- not the larger -- version of the new MXICBM because the maximum throw weight that would be allowed under SALT II is not needed.

Perhaps the most underappreciated feature of SALT II is the agreement recently reported to limit the number of warheads per missile to the maximum number thus far tested on that type of missile. This reduces by more than half the number of weapons the Soviets could eventually have mounted on their ICBMs, and by doing so makes protective measures such as multiple aim point systems (MAPS) for our own ICBMs possible. This constraint on reentry vehicles is vastly superior to whatever further reductions in MIRVed ICBMs that could conceivably have been negotiated. Yet Mr. Will ignores all this, and in an exercise in doublespeak equates this gain with the president's "failure to master the subject of SALT."

With regard to choosing the best system to protect some of our ICBMs, Mr. Will again chooses the cheap shot rather than the hard task of illuminating how extraordinarily difficult this problem is. The delay in choosing an alternate basing system is due to the flaws in all those studied and in the time required to analyze others. To urge blind haste in this decision, which will determine the effectiveness of our forces well beyond the turn of the century, is again a disservice.

The cruise missile also has another side. Within the "count-the-launchers" philosophy of the current stage of SALT, long-range cruise missiles are restricted to deployment on heavy bombers in order to provide a means of verification. The Soviet interest in limiting the range of these cruise missiles below what the U.S. believes necessary for adequate penetration has now been abandoned in return for a reasonable upper limit on the average number carried per bomber. Since there is no range limit for these cruise missiles, range verification is not at issue.

The problem of how to control and verify cruise missiles has not been solved and clearly remains an urgent item on future SALT agendas, where it can be dealt with in connection with other intermediate-range systems, such as the Soviet SS20 ballistic missile. The restriction to a 600-kilometer range, contained in the protocol with a duration of less than three years, will not affect any possible deployment plan. Hence, there has been no operationally significant concession here.

In light of the above, Mr. Will's three suggested amendments to a SALT II treaty are seen to be simply a part of what the agenda for SALT III should be: negotiations on intermediate-range systems and the throw-weight gap.

That SALT II has taken so long to negotiate is indeed disappinting. Delays induced by Soviet-American frictions, presidential elections and Watergate have taken their toll. Technological progress has compromised some of its original virtues and new strategic problems have arisen that one might wish it could solve. But in the real world of the possible, it has tended well to the tasks to which it was addressed. The next round of problems presses upon us. The challenge before us is to address them promptly in SALT III, benefiting from the lessons learned in SALT II. To ask that this next round of problems be loaded onto SALT II is to ensure failure through overload. This would be the result of accepting Mr. Will's counsel. Perhaps this is his intent.

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