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SALT II

The Senate debate on SALT II has turned from features of the treaty itself to U.S. strategic defense policy. Discussions of this kind can be useful if they transcend the fixation on numbers of weapons, delivery systems, and money, and focus instead on certain fundamental issues. I will mention two.

One is illustrated by nuclear war scenarios. Some proponents of SALT II believe that the use of any nuclear weapons will escalate to Armageddon and that it is not feasible to restrict a missile exchange to military targets. Some SALT II opponents believe that such a limited war could happen. If so, then the United States should be capable of both war against military targets, and all-out war including cities. What we in the West believe about this matter is less important than what the Russians believe, and they are in a position to act on their belief. Would they attack our Minuteman force, using the "heavy" MIRVed missiles allowed them under SALT II? Is the SALT II limitation on launchers, not missiles, a problem for us? We do know that the Soviets can launch some of their missiles in such a way that they could presumably reload the launchers with backup missiles. Such concerns do not matter under the Armageddon scenario, but they are vital under the military-war-only scenario.

A second critical issue arises from the necessity for assured command and control of strategic forces. There is a complex communication network that connects the President to the launch sites, submarines, and aircraft, so he can control their actions. If this network could be attacked and disrupted, the President could lose control—the forces might not be launched or might be launched by a lesser authority. Before acting, the President must have information on which to base his decision. What sources would he consider reliable enough to believe a nuclear attack had been launched against the United States—a telephone call from the Joint Chiefs, a teleprinter message from NORAD, or a presumed hot-line call from Moscow?

In thinking about this question, the implausibility of precipitate action by the President against a presumed attacker becomes evident. It has been said that the increasing vulnerability of our land-based missiles in the 1980's could be offset by launching them before they were hit by incoming weapons, requiring a faster than 30-minute decision. Such an action is better suited to a computer than a President under constitutional constraints and with the nation at risk. Yet high government officials give no assurance that such a measure might not be taken under pressure. We may be headed for a time in the 1980's when this hair-trigger situation will exist.

These issues are not the only ones raised by SALT II. Verification is another, and the treaty seems to be adequately verifiable. All these issues point to objectives for our defense policy. Not knowing how the Soviets view the Armageddon-versus-limited-war issue, we should avoid providing them with tempting strategic military targets. We should sustain a competitive strategic position to avoid Soviet hegemony in critical areas such as the Persian Gulf. Also required is a secure command and control system that provides current, accurate information for the President and avoids putting him in a position where precipitate action based on presumptive information is needed to prevent loss of a military force under attack.

SALT II does not limit us in these matters. Nor does it the Soviets, who can continue their buildup of strategic forces. In terms of true arms constraints, SALT II is at best a modest delaying action. The residual question is what effect the treaty might have on our resolve to accomplish our objectives. Would rejection increase the resolve of our decision-makers? Would acceptance be a palliative? To the logical mind that may seem improbable, but to the political mind it is plausible. The best course would be to sign SALT II and use our technology to keep our world interests viable. But in the current sour political climate, these may well be incompatible.—EDWARD E. DAVID, JR., *Chairman, Board of Directors, AAAS, and President, Exxon Research and Engineering Company, Florham Park, New Jersey*