Arms Control: Modest But Neutral Record

Agreements reached in the 1960's and 1970's have had limited impact but they have not harmed U.S. interests

A quarter-century of arms control negotiations have produced more rhetoric than substance, according to an exhaustive analysis of the record by a group at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. "What emerges above all is the modesty of what arms control has wrought," the group concludes in a massive report to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.*

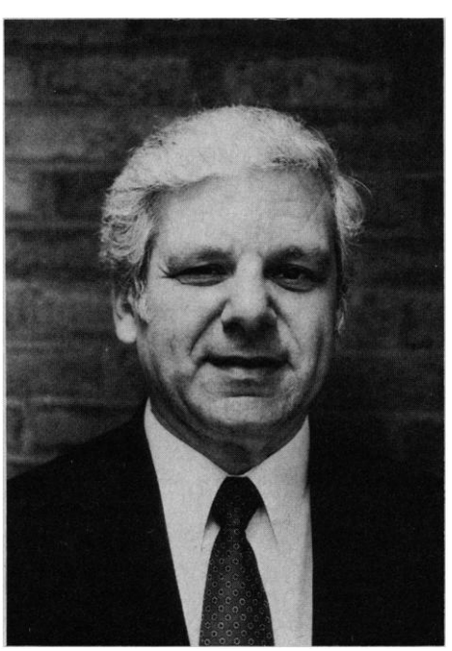
The study, headed by Albert Carnesale, who advised the U.S. delegation to the SALT I talks, indicates that, contrary to the expectations of arms control supporters, agreements reached during the 1960's and 1970's have had only a limited impact on the arms race. However, the study found little evidence to support conservatives' contentions that the arms control process has been detrimental to U.S. interests. "If the history reveals anything, it is that arms control has proved neither as promising as some had hoped nor as dangerous as others had feared," the report states.

The analysis focused on three ratified treaties—the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, the 1972 SALT I and antiballistic missile (ABM) Treaty, and the 1971 Accidents Measures Agreement—together with the unratified 1979 SALT II Treaty and the unsuccessful negotiations in the late 1970's aimed at limiting antisatellite (ASAT) weapons.

On the plus side, the study suggests that total force levels may have been somewhat constrained by the agreements, and both the United States and the Soviet Union have benefited from the fact that the arms control process has made strategic developments more predictable. "A world without negotiations, agreements and rules to promote verification would be one of far greater uncertainty and far more prone to unrestrained and potentially destabilizing arms competition," the report states.

However, the agreements have not resulted in significant changes in the structure of the forces of either side nor have they seriously impeded weapons developments. "All of the arms control agreements examined in this study were consistent with existing military force structures; that is, none required substantial changes in the nature or size of those forces."

The SALT agreements essentially codified existing inventories and plans of each side, and neither prevented the development of new technologies, the study notes. Even the ABM Treaty, which is often cited as an example of an accord that shut off an area of the arms race, permitted a broad range of research and development on ballistic missile systems. As a result, it "may merely have codified the postponement of a race in defensive systems until advancing technologies made effective defenses possible," the study suggests.



Albert Carnesale. *Headed the Harvard study team.*

Although some have argued that arms control agreements are easier to achieve when the United States bargains from a position of strength, the Harvard study indicates that this has not been the case in the past. "Arms control agreements have been concluded only when neither side had an appreciable advantage," the report states.

The test ban treaty and the SALT agreements came about when Soviet and U.S. strategic forces had developed to the point of overall equivalence—indeed, negotiations did not even begin until that point was reached—the study concludes. In contrast, the ASAT negotiations failed in part because the Soviet Union had already tested an antisatellite weapon, leading to a perception among some military analysts that the United States was at a disadvantage in this area.

The failure of the ASAT talks demonstrates another aspect of arms control: negotiations "have far more difficulty in coping with weapons programs that are under way and show promise." By the late 1970's, when the ASAT talks took place, the United States had launched a development program that was beginning to look promising. The nascent U.S. ASAT, instead of becoming a bargaining chip in the talks, in the end became potentially too valuable to negotiate away.

Some critics of arms control have argued that agreements have a "lulling" effect on the United States, producing a false sense of security that results in a decrease in military expenditures. As concrete evidence for this phenomenon, critics have pointed out that the ABM treaty was followed by a decline in R&D on antiballistic missile defenses. The Harvard study refutes this argument, however.

In some cases, such as nuclear testing, expenditures actually increased after an agreement was reached. In others, developments that led up to the negotiations—such as the Nixon Administration's vigorous promotion of antiballistic missile deployment as a bargaining chip in the ABM talks—stimulated rather than lulled developments.

The study was completed before the Reykjavik summit meeting, in which President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev came close to agreeing in principle on major cuts in strategic nuclear forces. An impasse over the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) precluded a final accord, and it has subsequently become evident that the two sides are also divided on whether complete elimination of ballistic missiles—a proposal apparently made by Reagan—is desirable.

Although Carnesale cautions that many factors beyond those addressed in the study were in evidence at Reykjavik, he says "we should not be surprised that the Soviets were not particularly interested in doing away with ballistic missiles—an area in which they have a comparative advantage." Nor is it surprising that Reagan found it difficult to compromise on SDI research, in which the United States has an edge.

■ COLIN NORMAN

*"Learning From Experience With Arms Control," U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (1986).