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“Diverting the Arms Race into the Permitted Channels”

The Nixon Administration, the MIRV-Mistake,
and the SALT Negotiations

By Stephan Kieninger
NPIHP Working Paper #9
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Christian F. Ostermann, Leopoldo Nuti, and Evan Pikulski, Series Editors

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“Diverting the Arms Race into the Permitted Channels”

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Executive Summary

Strategic arms control was a crucial element in US-Soviet relations. The five-year Interim Agreement of May 1972 (SALT I) was a milestone for détente. Its conclusion at the Moscow Summit in May 1972 underpinned US-Soviet efforts to downplay ideological differences, to search for common security interests, and to limit the size of their nuclear stockpiles. Yet, SALT I was also an imperfect nuclear arms control agreement that spurred the arms race and resulted in a sizeable buildup of strategic weaponry. Drawing from a broad range of American sources, this paper depicts the flawed U.S-Soviet efforts to work for sustainable strategic arms control agreements.

The paper illuminates Richard Nixon's and Henry Kissinger's thinking on nuclear affairs. It explains both their interest in the conclusion of a strategic arms control agreement as well as their ambition to continue the arms buildup. On the one hand, America lacked the financial resources for an escalation of the arms race with the Soviet Union due its costly global Cold War commitments and the Vietnam War. Meanwhile, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger gambled on technological advances through the deployment of hydra-headed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, the so-called MIRVs (Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles) in an effort to restore America's nuclear superiority. Yet, they miscalculated the speed of the Soviet Union's own MIRV program. Thus, Nixon's and Kissinger's approach gave the USSR the chance to overtake the United States in the arms race. The MIRV mistake was self-defeating in that it made superpower relations prone to tensions. It endangered the kind of sustainability that Nixon and Kissinger needed to pursue détente over the long term.

This paper probes into the bureaucratic battles between the supporters of a MIRV ban in the Department of State and its opponents in the White House and the Pentagon. It goes on to analyze Kissinger's efforts to gain Soviet concessions on MIRVs during much of 1973 and 1974 through SALT II, when the first setbacks for US-Soviet détente emerged. Finally, the paper assesses the rise of domestic protest against détente in the United States against the background of squabbles within the Ford Administration that kept the President from seeking the ratification of the compromise solution on SALT II found at the Vladivostok Summit in November 1974.

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¹ The paper draws on materials from my book *Dynamic Détente. The United States and Europe, 1964–1975*, published through the Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series at Rowman and Littlefield in 2016. I am grateful to Mark Kramer, the series editor, and to Rowman and Littlefield for their kind permission to reprint parts of two book chapters here.

own MIRV program. Thus, Nixon’s and Kissinger’s approach gave the USSR the chance to overtake the United States in the arms race. The MIRV mistake was self-defeating in that it made superpower relations prone to tensions. It endangered the kind of sustainability that Nixon and Kissinger needed to pursue détente over the long term.

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“Self-Defeating Power”: Richard Nixon’s and Henry Kissinger’s MIRV Mistake²

The Moscow Summit of 1972 was a crucial event. After years of protracted negotiations, Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev finalized and signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) Agreement, or SALT I.³ The summit was a symbol of détente. As Henry Kissinger observed, “never before have the world’s two most powerful nations placed their central armaments under formally agreed limitation and restraint.”⁴

Why were they able to reach such an agreement? According to Kissinger, it was because each power’s capacity to wipe out the other singlehandedly made for a “commonality of

² Foreign Relations of the United States (*FRUS*), 1969–1976, Vol. 32 (SALT I, 1969–1972), p. 93.

³ For the context, see Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect. Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003); Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2007).

⁴ Briefing by Henry Kissinger for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 15 June 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 1 (Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972), pp. 400, 401.

outlook” and “a sort of interdependence for survival.”⁵ The United States and the Soviet Union could have only waged war for the price of self-destruction. It seemed that the traditional notion of balance of power no longer applied in the nuclear age, that it no longer made sense to seek marginal advantages over an adversary.⁶ In June 1972, Kissinger told the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee that “now both we and the Soviet Union have begun to find that each increment of power does not necessarily represent an increment of usable political strength.” He stressed that it would be extremely dangerous if one side tried to obtain a decisive advantage by putting “a premium on striking first” or by “creating a defense to blunt the other side’s retaliatory capability.”⁷

However, during the same briefing before the Senate’s foreign policy experts, Kissinger also talked about American advantages. It seemed that the MIRV technology gave the United States a margin of superiority over the Soviets. MIRVs were a new technology that allowed for a nuclear delivery vehicle to be loaded with several nuclear warheads, each directed at a different target: one missile would split into several nuclear warheads, and they would in turn hit their separate targets more or less simultaneously. The United States began testing MIRVs in 1968 as they were a cost-effective way of increasing American firepower, providing “more bang for the buck.” Although America’s missile buildup had been stopped in 1968 at 1054 ICBMs, the MIRV technology enabled the United States to double or triple the number of warheads placed on existing missile sites. Among other uses, the United States could flood the Soviet Union’s Anti-

⁵ Briefing by Henry Kissinger for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 15 June 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 1 (Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972), pp. 400, 401.

⁶ On the evolution of nuclear strategy in the 1960s, see Francis Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft. History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press 2012).

⁷ Briefing by Henry Kissinger for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 15 June 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 1, p. 402.

Ballistic Missile system by firing more missiles than any defensive system could cope with. At this point, however, the Soviets began to develop their own MIRV capability.⁸

The first missiles had only one warhead, and both accuracy and reliability were worse than they were in the 1970s. In a nutshell, the deployment of MIRVs ran counter to efforts to stabilize the strategic balance. After all, land-based MIRVs in silos are a “good killer, but not a good survivor.”⁹ Due to the high accuracy, each superpower needed to fire just a couple of MIRVed missiles to wipe out a decisive number of the other side’s MIRVed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles. Thus, in the age of MIRVs, the attacker gained a decisively superior position. The downside of MIRVs was that they put a premium on surprise and preemption in a crisis.¹⁰

Kissinger told the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee that he was confident that America’s lead in the number of warheads “will be maintained during the period of the agreement, even if the Soviets deploy MIRVs on their own.” Moreover, as the Interim Agreement “confined the competition with the Soviet Union to the area of technology,” Kissinger was certain that “we have...a significant advantage.”¹¹ Yet in the end, Nixon’s and Kissinger’s aspirations for nuclear supremacy were self-defeating. The USSR had caught up with the United States and began to deploy MIRVed ballistic missiles in 1974. The Soviets were adding about 500 warheads to their ICBM force annually. According to some intelligence projections, the Soviet Union was expected to have as many as 14,000 ICBM warheads by the

⁸⁸ See John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate. U.S. Intelligence Analysis & Soviet Strategic Forces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1982).

⁹ McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival. Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House 1988), p. 551.

¹⁰ For a fresh account on the race in strategic weapons and its effects on U.S.-Soviet relations, see Stephan Kieninger, *Dynamic Détente. The United States and Europe, 1964–1975* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 2016).

¹¹ Briefing by Kissinger for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 15 June 1972, in *FRUS, 1969–1976, Vol. 1*, pp. 405, 406.

mid-1980s.¹² The final terms of the SALT I agreement gave the Soviets higher ceilings on Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (1607 to America's 1054) and Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (740 to 656). To many critics in the United States, it was a justifiable charge that Nixon and Kissinger had surrendered US missile superiority. It was only in 1972 that Richard Nixon acknowledged that his administration had to bear in mind the domestic costs of SALT.¹³ In May 1972, Marshall Wright, then Deputy Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, anticipated that public opposition to SALT would inevitably come. Wright predicted that a hostile public and Congress might take on the administration. He anticipated that the public might ask why the SALT Interim Agreement permitted the United States to possess fewer launchers than the Soviet Union. Wright rejected "the idea that we can defend the agreement because the Soviets had an active program and we didn't." In his view, this argument "was a loser with all but about the most sophisticated 5% of the American population." He forecasted that "the response of the other 95% is simply going to be 'if we needed a program, why the hell didn't we have one'."¹⁴

For the time being, SALT I gave the United States superiority in terms of the overall aggregate of warheads—providing the Soviets did not deploy MIRVs. In June 1972, Kissinger's Deputy Alexander Haig wrote a letter to Ronald Reagan to try to explain that due to the MIRVs, the 1710 American ICBMs and SLBMs permitted in SALT added up to about 5900 warheads compared to an aggregate of 3700 Soviet warheads.¹⁵ Yet, these figures would become obsolete

¹² See Pavel Podvig, "The Window of Vulnerability That Wasn't: Soviet Military Buildup in the 1970s--A Research Note," *International Security*, Summer 2008, Vol. 33, No. 1: 118-138.

¹³ See Memorandum of Conversation between Nixon, Smith, and Haig, 21 March 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Vol. 32, pp. 721-737.

¹⁴ Memorandum from Marshall Wright to Alexander Haig, "Sowing the Public and Congressional Soil for SALT", 25 May 1972, in National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park (MD), Nixon Presidential Materials (Nixon), National Security Council Files (NSC), SALT, Box 883. The Nixon Presidential Materials have been transferred to the Nixon Presidential Library. The organization of the materials and the box numbers remain identical.

¹⁵ See Letter from Haig to Reagan, 7 June 1972, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 887.

once the Soviet Union started to deploy MIRVs. The Interim Agreement forced the Nixon Administration to funnel more resources into strategic weapons.

From the outset, it was foreseeable that an agreement without a ban on MIRV would shift the competition in strategic arms to another level.¹⁶ As early as June 1969, ACDA Director Gerard Smith made a bold case for a MIRV ban when he reiterated that “when you leave weapon systems in the open you divert the arms race into the permitted channels. You might fool yourself that you have accomplished something.”¹⁷ However, Richard Nixon did not understand that a cutting-edge technological revolution such as the invention of MIRVs could dictate policy for years to come if their production and deployment were not prohibited early on. Moreover, the President was uninterested in the technical aspects of arms control and by these negotiations in general. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger saw value in arms control for its own sake. A couple of weeks in advance of the Moscow Summit of May 1972, Nixon told Kissinger that “I don’t give a about SALT. I couldn’t care less about it.”¹⁸ Richard Nixon believed that the Soviets were only responsive to power politics. He was convinced that “finally, it comes down to the men involved. It is the will of the man rather than the treaties.”¹⁹ His verdict was that “we are not gonna freeze ourselves.”²⁰

Why then did Nixon pursue arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union? Francis Gavin argues that, on the one hand, “Nixon recognized that after more than two decades of an

¹⁶ In 1969, ACDA predicted that the Soviet Union would be able to equip its large SS-9 ICBMs with eight warheads by 1978. See Memorandum from Lynn to Kissinger “Second Meeting of MIRV Committee”, 24 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 845.

¹⁷ Remarks by Smith, Transcript of an NSC Meeting on SALT, 17 July 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, p. 93.

¹⁸ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Nixon, 6 May 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 14 (Soviet Union, October 1971–May 1972), p. 752.

¹⁹ Remarks by Nixon, Transcript of a Meeting between Nixon, Kissinger and NATO Ambassadors, San Clemente, 30 June 1973, in NARA, Nixon, White House Special Files, President’s Office Files, Box 92.

²⁰ Remarks by Nixon, Transcript of a Meeting between Nixon, Kissinger, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 10 August 1971, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, p. 590.

expensive commitment to the Cold War, and years of bloody, failing war in Southeast Asia, Americans did not have the stomach for escalating the strategic arms race with the Soviets.”²¹ Nixon’s insight into the limits of American power on a global scale precipitated the Nixon Doctrine. On the other hand, as Gavin writes, Nixon and Kissinger were opposed to halting the arms race because they “wanted to return to nuclear superiority” which due to “domestic politics and the world situation...was simply not in the cards.”²² Indeed, Nixon and Kissinger were obsessed with the old days of nuclear superiority. In 1972, Nixon recalled that “at the time of the Cuban missile crisis it had been no contest, because we had a ten to one superiority. But it is not that way now.”²³ Nixon thought that if the United States were not able to regain numerical superiority, it should at least maintain a qualitative margin to keep the Soviet Union at bay. The American edge in the number of warheads had been shrinking since the Soviet Union had started to build up its arsenal in the 1960s. At that time, the Johnson Administration had invested considerable energy to conclude a comprehensive arms control agreement.

Ambitions and Setbacks: Strategic Arms Control during the Johnson Administration

Until 1968, the Johnson Administration’s arms control policy only brought progress gradually. As the Soviets were behind in the arms race, they rejected the US proposal for a freeze tabled back in 1964 at the Eighteen Nations Disarmament Conference in Geneva.²⁴ This freeze would have cemented US superiority. The only sign of progress in Johnson’s arms control policy was

²¹ Francis Gavin, "Nuclear Nixon. Ironies, Puzzles, and the Triumph of Realpolitik," in *Nixon in the World. American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977* edited by Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), pp. 126–145, here p. 133.

²² Gavin, *Nuclear Nixon*, p. 132.

²³ Memorandum of Conversation, Meeting between Nixon and the General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament, 21 March 1972, Editorial Note, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 14, p. 218.

²⁴ See Memorandum from Bundy to McNamara, 14 January 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11 (Arms Control and Disarmament), pp. 3–5.

the conclusion of the Outer Space Treaty that the President pushed through in 1966, despite resistance from the military. A new challenge emerged in the summer of 1966 when the Soviet Union began to construct an Anti-Ballistic Missile system to improve Moscow’s protection in case of nuclear war.²⁵ In addition, according to CIA estimates, the USSR had started to build ICBM launchers in larger numbers than Washington had anticipated.²⁶ Thus, in late 1966, strategic arms turned into a top priority on the President’s agenda. The Soviet ABM effort pressured the Johnson Administration to develop an American ABM shield. Lyndon Johnson was aware that a race in defensive weapons could disrupt the search for a lasting *détente*.

In December 1966, he had his trusted Soviet Union adviser Tommy Thompson propose to Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Union’s Ambassador in Washington, that America and the Soviet Union enter negotiations on a freeze of both defensive and offensive arms.²⁷ But negotiations would be difficult and drawn-out. What should the United States do in the meantime in response to the Soviet ABM system—do nothing, develop a thin ABM system or commit to a thick ABM shield?²⁸ Johnson could think of nothing “more desirable” than “an agreement that would hold in that field.”²⁹ At the same time, it was uncertain whether he could afford it politically to refrain from deploying an ABM system. Although Johnson admitted that he might risk “a helluva

²⁵ See Memorandum from Keeny to Rostow “CIA Intelligence Reports on the Status of the Anti-Missile Defense System for Moscow”, 31 May 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 10 (National Security Policy), pp. 402–405.

²⁶ See National Intelligence Estimate NIE 11-8-66 “Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Attack”, 20 October 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 10, pp. 439–443.

²⁷ See Memorandum of Conversation between Thompson and Dobrynin, 7 December 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 405–407.

²⁸ See Memorandum from Deputy Secretary of Defense Vance to Johnson, 10 December 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 10, pp. 474–476.

²⁹ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Johnson and McNamara, 7 December 1966, cited in Hal Brands, “Progress Unseen. U.S. Arms Control Policy and the Origins of *Détente*, 1963–1968,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2006), pp. 253–285, here p. 276.

political crisis” if he did nothing, Secretary of Defense McNamara recommended he stay tough.³⁰

Johnson followed McNamara’s advice. He started to prepare the public for a debate on the ABM issue in his State of the Union address in January 1967 when he emphasized that “our objective is not to continue the cold war, but to end it.” Johnson reiterated that “we have a solemn duty to halt the arms race.”³¹ On 21 January 1967, Johnson wrote a letter to Aleksey Kosygin, the Chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers, proposing that the United States and the Soviet Union conduct negotiations on strategic arms.³² Five weeks later, Kosygin agreed in principle, promising an exchange of views on strategic weapons.³³ Yet, nothing happened. In the summer of 1967, Johnson had an unexpected opportunity to meet Kosygin. In the wake of the Six-Day War in the Middle East, Kosygin came to New York to visit the United Nations and to facilitate peace talks. After some haggling over the location of a summit, Johnson and Kosygin eventually met neither in Washington nor in New York, but in the small town of Glassboro in New Jersey. Johnson used the meeting to push hard for the start of strategic arms talks. But every time Johnson brought up strategic arms, Kosygin stonewalled or changed subjects. Glassboro came to nothing. Kosygin lacked authorization from the Politburo to bargain with Johnson.³⁴

³⁰Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Johnson and McNamara, 4 January 1967, Editorial Note, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 10, p. 532.

³¹ Lyndon B. Johnson, Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, 10 January 1967, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1967*, 2 Vols. (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), Vol. 1, pp. 10, 11.

³² See Letter from Johnson to Kosygin, 21 January 1967, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 431–432.

³³ See Letter from Kosygin to Johnson, 27 February 1967, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 451–452.

³⁴ For this argument, see Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence. Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Times Books 2001), p. 153.

Furthermore, the Soviet Union was in the midst of an enormous strategic arms buildup, and the Kremlin leaders wanted to negotiate only after they had achieved parity.³⁵

The failure of Glassboro forced the Johnson Administration to deploy a thin ABM shield: the Sentinel system. This decision had bold implications. A race in defensive weapons could severely dampen the prospects for the Johnson Administration’s peaceful engagement with the Soviet Union. An accelerated arms competition might hinder the envisaged expansion of human contacts across the Iron Curtain and prevent its liberalizing effects from reaching the Soviet system.³⁶ CIA Director Richard Helms emphasized that “the strains imposed by such an effort would at the very least retard the movement we have thought might be developing towards moderation in the Soviet outlook and towards liberalization in Soviet society.”³⁷

Moreover, the ABM issue had bold implications as it closely intertwined with offensive arms. After all, MIRVs were more likely to be deployed if one side possessed a thick ABM system: Only hydra-headed missiles would be able to potentially penetrate a thick shield. Lyndon Johnson had already authorized the start of the US MIRV program back in January 1965.³⁸ It was justified as “a hedge against growing Soviet ABM capabilities and as a cost-offensive force multiplier.”³⁹ The Joint Chiefs of Staff pressured Robert McNamara to speed up the efforts for

³⁵ Compared to 1054 American ICBM launchers in 1967, the Soviet Union was supposed to have a maximum of about 550 launchers in mid 1968. See Draft Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson “Production and Deployment of the NIKE-X”, 22 December 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 10, pp. 483–509.

³⁶ For an excellent account, see *Thomas A. Schwartz, Lyndon Johnson and Europe. In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press 2003).

³⁷ Memorandum from Helms to Rostow “Soviet Responses to a United States Decision to Deploy ABM Defenses”, 10 December 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 411–412.

³⁸ Two days in advance of his inauguration, Johnson announced this decision in public albeit he did not refer specifically to the term “MIRVs”. See Lyndon B. Johnson, Special Message to the Congress on the State of the Nation’s Defenses, 18 January 1965, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1965*, 2 Vols. (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), Vol. 1, pp. 62–71. For the context, see James E. Goodby, *At the Borderline of Armageddon. How American Presidents Managed the Atom Bomb* (Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield 1996), p. 75.

³⁹ Gerard Smith, *Disarming Diplomat. The Memoirs of Ambassador Gerard C. Smith, Arms Control Negotiator* (Lanham, MD, Madison Books 1996), p. 164.

the development of MIRVs.⁴⁰ The State Department and McNamara himself were opposed to the MIRV program. An American MIRV capability would only force the Soviets to develop MIRVs as well. Additionally, allowing for research and development of MIRVs would make a mockery of the efforts for a strategic arms freeze. Hence, in January 1967, the State Department's experts proposed a general ban on testing any kind of new weapons—which included MIRVs, although they were not explicitly mentioned.⁴¹

The Joint Chiefs insisted that on-site inspections were needed to be able to verify a potential ban on MIRV testing, although evidence suggested that a flight ban could be monitored by photographic reconnaissance satellites.⁴² The struggle between the Department of State/ACDA and the Joint Chiefs continued until June 1968 when a letter by Alexey Kosygin to Lyndon Johnson signaled Soviet readiness to exchange views on strategic arms “more concretely.”⁴³ After a year of standstill, American SALT preparations now went into high gear. The crux of MIRVs was that while MIRV flight tests could be detected, it was not possible in a later stage to distinguish MIRVed missiles from regular ones.⁴⁴ Both Johnson and Rusk seemed to be willing to support a MIRV ban. They agreed that comprehensive arms control efforts necessitated a MIRV ban.⁴⁵ However, they believed it would be counterproductive to mention

⁴⁰ See Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, 19 January 1967, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 426–429.

⁴¹ Draft State Department Paper “Possible Freeze Agreement on Strategic Forces”, by Raymond Garthoff, Wreath Gathright and Leon Sloss, in NARA, Record Group 59 (Records of the Department of State), Records of the Policy Planning Council 1965–1969, Box 325. See also Raymond Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press 2001), pp. 206–207.

⁴² Remarks by Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Transcript of a Meeting of Principals, 14 March 1967, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 466–467.

⁴³ Letter from Kosygin to Johnson, 21 June 1968, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, p. 623.

⁴⁴ See Special National Intelligence Estimate SNIE 11-13-68 “U.S. Intelligence Capabilities to Monitor Certain Limitations on Soviet Strategic Weapons Programs”, 18 July 1968, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 646–648.

⁴⁵ As early as January 1968, Robert McNamara pointed out that if the Soviet Union added accurate MIRVs to its heavy SS-9 ICBMs, it could destroy U.S. Minuteman ICBMs in their silos. See Draft Memorandum from

this readiness for a MIRV ban in the preparations for the SALT negotiations. Such a move would have only triggered outright resistance from the military. McNamara’s successor Clark Clifford was opposed to the idea. Rusk assured the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he took their position seriously.⁴⁶ Finally, the Johnson Administration arduously lined up all departments and agencies to bring about a SALT position that was unanimously supported.

The Joint Chiefs approved the administration’s position for negotiations after the conclusion of the first MIRV test on 16 August 1968.⁴⁷ Yet, the guidance for the American SALT delegation left open the possibility for a MIRV ban. The instructions did not include any reference that explicitly allowed for MIRVs. Moreover, it was stated that, “any specific Soviet proposal that the U.S. halt MIRV testing or deployment must be referred to Washington for consideration.”⁴⁸ Raymond Garthoff argues that Johnson and Rusk would have been prepared to propose a complete ban on MIRV and ABM if the Soviet-led invasion into Czechoslovakia had not prevented the start of SALT talks in the autumn of 1968.⁴⁹ The consensus at the outset of the interagency preparations for SALT would have provided the opportunity to overrule the JCS during the negotiations if need be. Despite the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, Lyndon Johnson still hoped for a summit meeting to start SALT negotiations within the remainder of his tenure.⁵⁰

McNamara to Johnson “Strategic Offensive and Defensive Forces”, 15 January 1968, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 10, pp. 655–674.

⁴⁶ Record of Meeting between Johnson, Rusk and Clifford, 29 July 1968, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XIV, pp. 666–675.

⁴⁷ See Paper Approved by the Executive Committee of the Committee of Principals “Strategic Missile Talks Proposal”, 14 August 1968, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 674–676.

⁴⁸ “Strategic Missiles Talks – Initial Presentation of U.S. Position, 24 August 1968, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, p. 711.

⁴⁹ See Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, p. 211–212.

⁵⁰ In September 1968, Johnson had Rostow discuss the chances for a summit and for the opening of missile talks with Dobrynin. See Memorandum of Conversation between Rostow, 9 September 1968, Editorial Note, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, pp. 716–717.

Richard Nixon's victory in the presidential election diminished the chances for a summit, but Johnson did not yet give up. He had Rusk discuss a potential meeting with Dobrynin.⁵¹ However, these plans did not materialize. Richard Nixon had already informed the Soviet leadership that he would not be bound by an agreement that Johnson might conclude. More than a year passed until the Nixon Administration managed to sort out its new SALT position. In late November 1968, Clark Clifford accurately predicted that "when Nixon comes in, it could be a year before you get back to the point where we are now."⁵²

"Stop-Where-We-Are" or Continue the Arms Race: The Nixon White House and ACDA in the Struggle over MIRVs and ABM

Richard Nixon's tenure offered a unique chance to stop the arms race. The United States and the USSR were about to reach parity. Both were ready to continue détente after the suppression of the Prague Spring had prevented the start of strategic arms negotiations under Lyndon Johnson. But it took the Nixon Administration until November 1969 to put together a new SALT position and to start official exploratory talks with the Soviet Union. President Nixon did all he could to turn these incipient SALT negotiations with the Soviets into a power play. Early on, he invested a great deal of effort into obtaining Congressional approval for the deployment of the new "Safeguard" ABM system.⁵³ Moreover, Nixon ignored the advice of the arms control community

⁵¹ Rusk discussed the idea of a summit with Dobrynin on 25 November 1968. He sent a summary of the conversation to Llewellyn Thompson in Moscow the next day. See Telegram from the Department of State (Rusk) to the Embassy in the Soviet Union (literally eyes only for Thompson), 26 November 1968, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 14 (Soviet Union), pp. 769–774.

⁵² Notes on Foreign Policy Meeting, 6 November 1968, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 14, p. 767.

⁵³ At a press conference on 14 March 1969, Nixon announced his decision to establish a new ABM program called "Safeguard" which was a modified version of Lyndon Johnson's Sentinel system. The idea for Sentinel only came into being to placate public opinion and the U.S. military after Johnson's efforts to bring about a strategic arms freeze with the Soviets had failed. The idea behind Safeguard was to protect U.S. missile sites from Soviet attack. Moreover, Richard Nixon thought that Safeguard might be turned into a protection shield for the defense of U.S. cities over the long term. Initially, the ABM system was to be deployed at two missile bases, but it was planned to be extended to twelve sites for area defense by 1973. Safeguard called for 12 separate sites for area missile defense, 19 radars, and several hundred interceptor missiles. See Richard Nixon, *The President's News Conference*, 14 March

to establish a moratorium on MIRV testing. He was eager to continue testing and to deploy MIRVs as soon as possible.⁵⁴ Nixon was determined to extend America’s hitherto existing margin of technological superiority. This attitude raised a storm of public protest. Did Nixon want to “let the nuclear genie out of the bottle?” asked a group of concerned members of Congress.⁵⁵ The arms control community was alarmed as well: “Do weapons dictate policy? Or do we decide on the basis of our policy concepts what weapons we wish to deploy?”⁵⁶ This fundamental question was brought up by John F. Kennedy’s former deputy National Security Adviser Carl Kaysen in a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 13 March 1969. Kaysen reiterated that the United States and the USSR were about to enter into an ever more dangerous arms race if the Nixon Administration failed to ban ABM and MIRVs through comprehensive arms control efforts.

The evolution of defensive and offensive weapons was interconnected. The construction of ABM sites around Moscow in the mid 1960s triggered the American MIRV program. A major justification for the deployment of MIRVs was their capability to penetrate ABM. Richard Nixon and his advisers understood that a ban on ABM would almost automatically lead to a MIRV ban.⁵⁷ The choice in front of Nixon was either to stop the arms race or to accelerate it. The State

1969, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1969*, containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), pp. 208–216.

⁵⁴ The testing of MIRVs had been started in August 1968. According to a memorandum from Alexander Haig, seven MIRV flights tests of Minuteman ICBMs had taken place until June 1969. 21 more tests were scheduled until June 1970. See Memorandum from Haig to Kissinger, 17 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 845.

⁵⁵ On 5 June 1969, 45 members of Congress issued a statement warning that “once large-scale ABM deployment begins and MIRV testing has been completed, the nuclear genie will be out of the bottle”. See Deborah Welch Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust, US-Soviet Relations during the Cold War* (Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press 1997), p. 162.

⁵⁶ Carl Kaysen, Statement for the Subcommittee on Disarmament Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 13 March 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 840.

⁵⁷ Helmut Sonnenfeldt emphasized that most observers assumed that the Soviets were “driving for a total ban on ABM which leads logically to a ban on MIRVs”. See Memorandum from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger “Summary of Salto 58, Thinkpiece re Present Position of Preliminary SALT”, 3 December 1969, in *FRUS, 1969–1976*, Vol. 32, p. 164.

Department and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency pleaded to halt the arms race and to “stop where we are.”⁵⁸ But Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger fought for the deployment of both MIRVs and ABM. Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard made no bones when he argued that “it will be easier for us to defend our MIRV before Congress if the Soviets have an NCA level of ABM.”⁵⁹

In August 1969, a congressional amendment to prohibit the Safeguard system while permitting research and development on other ABM programs was defeated in Congress by a one-vote margin. Vice President Spiro Agnew decided the tiebreak vote. Nixon saw the ABM vote as “a major victory” for his new Administration.⁶⁰ Publicly, the deployment of the Safeguard ABM system was justified by Soviets efforts to gain nuclear supremacy through the deployment of modern heavy ICBMs, such as the SS-9. Conversely, the Soviets had reason to assume that the United States sought to cement its technological supremacy.⁶¹ In these circumstances, the first months of the Nixon Administration offered a unique window of opportunity to halt the arms race. This was particularly true in terms of MIRVs. It was assumed that a moratorium on MIRV testing could be monitored through satellite surveillance or radar tracking. In contrast, an agreement not to deploy MIRVs necessitated on-site inspections to check the number of warheads deployed on a launcher. However, the Soviet Union rejected these on-site inspections, determining them to be too intrusive. In effect, MIRVs could only be limited if

⁵⁸ Paper prepared by the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency “A ‘Stop-Where-We-Are’ Proposal for SALT”, 11 June 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 41–49.

⁵⁹ Memorandum from Packard to Kissinger, 2 July 1970, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, p. 299.

⁶⁰ Nixon emphasized that “this is a top priority project”. See Memorandum from Nixon to Kissinger, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, 7 August 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 844.

⁶¹ Dobrynin asked Thompson whether the United States intended to insist on superiority or whether the Nixon Administration accepted parity. See Memorandum of Conversation between Thompson and Dobrynin, 5 May 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 873.

the two sides found agreement before either side had carried out enough testing to develop an operational capability.⁶²

The MIRV issue gained even more public attention when Senator Edward W. Brooke (R-Mass.) urged Richard Nixon to propose to the USSR an immediate moratorium on MIRV-testing in April 1969.⁶³ Henry Kissinger rejected this idea when he wrote to Nixon, reiterating that “a moratorium would tie your hand on strategic arms questions.”⁶⁴ The MIRV issue soon aroused a major arms control debate within the Nixon Administration. Gerard Smith, the head of the Arms Control Agency (ACDA) and leader-designate of the American delegation to the SALT negotiations, channeled public and Congressional critique of the race in MIRVs and ABMs. He confronted the Nixon White House with a proposal to immediately halt the competition in strategic arms. Smith’s formula was convincing: “Stop-Where-We-Are” (SWWA). Smith’s proposal for a complete ban on MIRVs and ABM garnered the idea for a freeze in both defense and offensive weapons from Lyndon Johnson’s proposals in 1964 and 1967.⁶⁵

Smith’s rationale was convincing. He argued that both sides had accumulated enough ICBM launchers to possess a secure second-strike capability. Neither of the two superpowers was striving for a first-strike-capability. There were benefits for both sides in agreeing to SWWA. The massive Soviet ICBM build-up could be stopped. Smith argued that “with a fulfilled freeze on Soviet ABM the threat now largely justifying the U.S. MIRV program would not develop.”⁶⁶ If both superpowers had agreed to the SWWA logic, the arms race might have

⁶² See Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*, p. 162.

⁶³ See Letter from Brooke to Nixon, 16 April 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 845.

⁶⁴ Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon “Continued Congressional Interest in a MIRV Test Moratorium”, 23 May 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 845.

⁶⁵ See Smith, *Disarming Diplomat*, p. 165.

⁶⁶ Memorandum from Smith to Rogers “A Strategic ‘Stop-Where-We-Are’ Program”, 9 May 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 844.

been stopped or, at least, decisively slowed down. The number of ICBM launchers would have been frozen and qualitative improvement like MIRVs and mobile ICBM launchers would not have been permitted. However, it remains unknown whether or not the Soviets would have accepted SWWA: Nixon forbade Smith to submit the proposal in the SALT negotiations.⁶⁷

ACDA anticipated that the United States would benefit from a MIRV ban. As early as 1969, ACDA predicted that the USSR would be able to deploy ICBMs with up to eight MIRVs by 1978. It was argued that “needless to say, if 400 [Soviet] SS-9 can throw 3,200 accurate warheads at Minuteman, a MIRV ban looks good and Safeguard, with its few hundred interceptors, looks ineffectual.”⁶⁸ Given these predictions, even Helmut Sonnenfeldt and Lawrence Lynn of Kissinger’s NSC staff came to endorse Smith’s SWWA proposal which Sonnenfeldt found “intriguing.”⁶⁹ In addition, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird—a strong advocate of the Safeguard ABM-system—acknowledged that a MIRV ban was in the American interest.⁷⁰ The CIA detected the first “footprints”⁷¹ of a Soviet MIRV program, which Kissinger perceived as a “massive problem” for his effort to prevent a MIRV ban.⁷² The theory of SWWA was convincing. A comprehensive arms control agreement was easier to verify. Yet, the Joint

⁶⁷ See Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk. The Story of SALT I* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 1985), p. 163.

⁶⁸ See Memorandum from Lynn to Kissinger “Second Meeting of MIRV Committee”, 24 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 845.

⁶⁹ See Memorandum from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger “A ‘A Stop-Where-We-Are’ Arms Control Package”, 5 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 844.

⁷⁰ Memorandum from Laird to Kissinger “The SWWA Proposal”, 26 June 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 86–87. However, Laird changed his position in September 1969. He opposed a MIRV ban arguing that the United States lacked the capability to monitor the Soviet ABM efforts. See Memorandum from Tucker to Laird “U.S. Policy Decision on SALT”, 7 November 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 874.

⁷¹ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Attorney General Mitchell, 18 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, Henry A. Kissinger Telephone Conversations (HAK Telcons), Box 2.

⁷² Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Nixon, 23 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, HAK Telcons, Box 2.

Chiefs of Staff rejected this logic. They argued that “a moratorium implies trust, in this case of an unpredictable adversary, and foregoes the protections normally afforded by a treaty.”⁷³

Gerard Smith and State Department Counselor Richard F. Pederson introduced the SWWA proposal at the first NSC meeting on SALT on 17 June 1969. Kissinger could merely insist on on-site inspections to torpedo SWWA, knowing the Soviets would not agree to them. In the second NSC meeting on SALT, Nixon argued that it did not make sense to table a serious SALT opening position as the Soviets might counter it with a propaganda proposal. But how could Nixon know? In effect, Nixon urged Smith to make “proposals in steps [and] to explore taking it in smaller bites.”⁷⁴ However, Smith did not back down. He confronted Nixon again, insisting that the United States had to come out with a comprehensive position and could later fall back to more restricted options. In the end, the President prevailed. Nixon did not permit a proposal for a MIRV ban. He advised Smith that, “in short, your task in the initial phase of the talks is to explore the Soviet intentions without yourself placing on the table the full range of alternative arrangement that we might consider.”⁷⁵

The MIRV Mistake: From the Debates in 1969 to the First Round of Negotiations in April 1970

Before the SALT exploratory talks in Helsinki started in November 1969, Gerard Smith reiterated that the “suspension of MIRV testing” would be the “only thing the Soviets might think an adequate quid pro quo for their missile stop.”⁷⁶ Based on this line of thought, Smith

⁷³ Memorandum from Wheeler to Laird “‘Stop-Where-We-Are’ Option for SALT”, 23 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 873.

⁷⁴ Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, 25 June 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, p. 85.

⁷⁵ Letter from Nixon to Smith, 21 July 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, p. 107.

⁷⁶ Letter from Smith to Kissinger, 3 November 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, Institutional Files, Box H-025.

submitted draft instructions for the SALT delegation.⁷⁷ The Department of Defense position on the MIRV/ABM issue was different. The Pentagon opposed a MIRV ban. Instead, it wanted to establish a limit on the number of ICBMs launchers. According to the military, the US needed MIRVs as the Pentagon planners thought it impossible for the United States to reliably monitor the Soviet ABM efforts.⁷⁸ Paul Nitze, then Melvin Laird's trusted man in the US SALT delegation, was of a similar mind. Nitze insisted on a reduction of the Soviet fixed land based missiles in order to diminish the vulnerability of the US Minuteman force.⁷⁹ In effect, Nitze and the Department of Defense demanded massive Soviet reductions in the number of ICBM launchers that the USSR had been constructing during the last couple of years.⁸⁰ Nitze did not rule out a MIRV ban, but his main objective was to get public support for new arms programs, such as the development of mobile missile launchers.⁸¹

Nitze's ambiguous approach suited the White House well.⁸² When the official exploratory SALT talks with the Soviet Union were about to start in Helsinki in November 1969, Nixon invited Nitze to see him for a confidential discussion at the White House. The President offered him a backchannel for direct communications. Nixon did not trust Secretary of State William Rogers and Gerard Smith. He urged Nitze to report anything he disapproved. Nitze declined the

⁷⁷ See Memorandum from Smith to Kissinger "Draft NSDM for SALT", 7 November 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 874.

⁷⁸ See Memorandum from Tucker to Laird "U.S. Policy Decisions on SALT", 7 November 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 874.

⁷⁹ See Memorandum by Nitze, 6 November 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 874.

⁸⁰ See Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, 10 November 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 153–159.

⁸¹ Memorandum by Nitze "Draft NSDM for SALT", no date, sent with Cover Note from Lynn to Kissinger, 6 November 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, Institutional Files, Box H-025. For a good study on Nitze's thinking, see Strobe Talbott, *The Master of the Game. Paul Nitze and the Nuclear Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1989).

⁸² Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, 11 November 1969 "Your Meeting with Paul Nitze, November 12, 1969", in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 874.

offer. He wanted to be a loyal member of Smith’s delegation.⁸³ Nixon and Nitze shared the assumption that it was too early in the game to put forward specific SALT proposals. Rogers, and particularly Smith, objected, wanting to approach the Soviets with a comprehensive proposal. They believed that “if MIRVs are not included in the negotiations, then an agreement is meaningless.” When Smith insisted that the Nixon Administration have a position on MIRVs in case the Soviets raised the issue, Nixon, paying lip service, agreed that “we must be prepared to talk about MIRV.”⁸⁴

In fact though, Nixon still considered MIRVs as the only issue “we really want to hold the line on.”⁸⁵ Therefore, he did not allow his SALT delegation to raise the question of MIRVs and denied Smith and his team the authority to explore Soviet views on MIRVs. The Soviet delegation did not take the initiative to raise MIRVs. Gerard Smith thought that the Soviet side might have assumed that Congressional and public pressure would make the US talk about MIRVs.⁸⁶ It might be that the Soviets expected the United States to bring up the matter as Washington was about to deploy MIRVs and the Soviet Union was not.⁸⁷ The prospects to discuss MIRVs during the first round of the talks seemed promising. “The meetings have been remarkably free of propaganda and polemic”⁸⁸ and most observers assumed that the Soviets were

⁸³ See Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost. At the Center of Decision. A Memoir* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld 1989), pp. 298–299.

⁸⁴ Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, 10 November 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 158, 159.

⁸⁵ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Nixon, 24 October 1969, in NARA, Nixon, HAK Telcons, Box 2.

⁸⁶ See Smith, *Doubletalk*, p. 166.

⁸⁷ See “Report of the U.S. Delegation to the Preliminary Strategic Arms Limitation Talks”, 29 December 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 876.

⁸⁸ Memorandum from Farley to the Under Secretaries Committee “December 4 Discussion of Helsinki SALT Talks”, 2 December 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 875.

“driving for a total ban on ABM which leads logically to a ban on MIRVs.”⁸⁹ However, nothing happened. On 22 December 1969, the exploratory talks came to an end. MIRVs were not raised, and there was still no consistent SALT position in Washington. The first round of SALT negotiations was scheduled to begin in April 1970. There was pressure to find an interagency consensus in Washington.⁹⁰

The Department of State and ACDA were still determined to go for a comprehensive agreement, including a ban of MIRVs and ABM. The Soviets were interested in an ABM ban as they wanted to avoid a costly race in defensive arms.⁹¹ Conversely, the White House, the Pentagon and the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted to avoid an ABM ban as it would complicate the MIRV program. Yet, Congress and public opinion were still opposed to the deployment of MIRVs.⁹² Thus, Nixon designed a proposal for a MIRV ban that would placate Congress, but would be unacceptable for the Soviets. Nixon and Kissinger demanded on-site inspections as a proviso in order to make sure that the American proposal for a MIRV ban would not be accepted.

Additionally, the White House did everything in its power to prevent a meeting between Gerard Smith and Dobrynin. Kissinger was concerned that Smith might propose a MIRV ban which would run counter to the Vietnam-SALT linkage that the White House pursued.⁹³ Richard

⁸⁹ Memorandum from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger “Summary of Salto 58, Thinkpiece re Present Position of Preliminary SALT”, 3 December 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, p. 164.

⁹⁰ For an in-depth account on the negotiations, see Arvid Schors, *Doppelter Boden. Die SALT-Verhandlungen 1963–1979* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2016). See also John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn. The Story of SALT* (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey’s 1989).

⁹¹ See Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, p. 259.

⁹² Senator Ed Brooke (R-MA) scored a 72-6 margin in the Senate when he issued a resolution demanding to “immediately suspend deployment of all offensive and defensive weapons”. See Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1979), p. 541. In April 1969, Brooke proposed a MIRV moratorium. See Letter from Brooke to Nixon, 16 April 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 845.

⁹³ Kissinger emphasized that Smith’s proposal for a moratorium would “run counter to that other game we are playing”. See Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Laird, 28 October 1969, in NARA, Nixon, HAK Telcons, Box 2.

Nixon was eager to make progress in SALT dependent on Soviet help to disengage the United States from Vietnam. The Soviets were obviously surprised by Nixon’s pursuit of linkage. When Anatoly Dobrynin came to the White House to establish the famous backchannel with Henry Kissinger on 17 February 1969, he was astonished to learn that Nixon intended to make the start of strategic arms control negotiations dependent from “progress on political issues” in other areas. Dobrynin was surprised by Nixon’s statement that “there is no guarantee that freezing strategic weapons at the present level alone would bring about peace.”⁹⁴ Dobrynin countered that “we do not see here any direct linkage with the resolution of other political problems.”⁹⁵ The Soviet leadership had the feeling that “the United States is not really interested in disarmament talks.”⁹⁶ Eventually, though, linkage turned out to be “a recipe for deadlock.”⁹⁷ Vietnam was not a suitable issue on which to test Soviet credibility. Apart from arms supplies, Moscow’s ability to influence the North Vietnamese in the peace talks with the United States was limited.⁹⁸

In contrast, the arms control community was guided by the premise that the Vietnam conflict will pass, but the atomic age will last for eternity. The arms control officials in ACDA and in the Department of State were convinced that it was imperative to keep US-Soviet quarrels

⁹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation between Nixon/Kissinger/Toon and Dobrynin, 17 February 1969, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 12 (Soviet Union, January 1969–October 1970), p. 39, 40.

⁹⁵ Dobrynin’s account of his first meeting with Nixon and Kissinger on 17 February 1969 is printed in *Soviet-American Relations. The Détente Years, 1969–1972*, pp. 14–18, here p. 17 (hereinafter referred to as *SAR*). The volume, published by the U.S. Department of State in Association with the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was edited by David Geyer and Douglas Selva. It includes both Kissinger’s as well as Dobrynin’s accounts of their backchannel meetings.

⁹⁶ Dobrynin made this point in a conversation with Senator Charles Percy on 27 March 1969. See Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon “Conversation between Senator Percy and Ambassador Dobrynin”, no date, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 12, p. 101.

⁹⁷ See Jussi Hanhimäki, “Dr. Kissinger” or “Mr. Henry”? Kissingerology, Thirty Years and Counting,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (2003), pp. 637–676, here p. 649.

⁹⁸ See Lorenz Lüthi, “Beyond Betrayal: Beijing, Moscow and the Paris Negotiations, 1971–1973,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (2009), 57–107.

over Vietnam separated from strategic arms issues.⁹⁹ From Nixon's and Kissinger's vantage point though, the arms race in itself was not a major source of potential conflict. Thus, SALT could be linked with issue areas where superpower interests crashed—such as Vietnam. When the Vietcong started a full-scale offensive in the spring of 1972, it cast a shadow over the Moscow Summit. President Nixon repeatedly toyed with the idea to sacrifice SALT, the ABM treaty and the summit in order to prevent the impending surrender in Vietnam. Nixon told Kissinger that he didn't think “we can survive a Soviet summit as a country if we are humiliated in Vietnam.”¹⁰⁰ Nixon believed that “the U.S. will be finished as a world power” if he lost South Vietnam while negotiating at the Moscow Summit.¹⁰¹

While Nixon could think of nothing but Vietnam, Kissinger believed that SALT was the issue of the day. Whereas Nixon wanted Kissinger to use his top-secret trip to Moscow in late April 1972 to “get action on Vietnam,”¹⁰² Kissinger disagreed and informed Nixon that “I do not believe that Moscow is in direct collusion with Hanoi.” Kissinger pointed out that “at this time the leaders here seem extremely embarrassed and confused.” Kissinger came to the conclusion that “their summit objectives go far beyond Vietnam and would be much more easily achievable without it.”¹⁰³ Eventually, the Moscow Summit signaled that Vietnam did not stand in the way of arms control and détente. The ABM Treaty and the Interim Agreement were finalized despite the escalation of the Vietnam War.

⁹⁹ For an in-depth account on the role of the nuclear scientific community in the debate on MIRVs and ABMs, see Zuoyue Wang, *In Sputnik's Shadow. The President's Science Advisory Committee and Cold War America* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁰ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Nixon, 9 April 1972, in NARA, Nixon, HAK Telcons, Box 13.

¹⁰¹ Memorandum of Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, 10 April 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 14, p. 281.

¹⁰² Memorandum from Nixon to Kissinger, 20 April 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 14, p. 449.

¹⁰³ Message from Kissinger to Nixon, 23 April 1972, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 14, p. 588.

“The MIRV Mistake Becomes a Policy”: The SALT Negotiations, 1970–1972¹⁰⁴

The first round of SALT negotiations was scheduled to begin in April 1970. In March, the Nixon Administration still lacked a coherent position for the talks. Time was running out. Nixon had Kissinger issue a directive to all involved agencies to sort out four SALT options.¹⁰⁵ Kissinger designated Raymond Garthoff, then the Chief of Staff of the SALT delegation, to consult with all agencies and to bring about four options. Garthoff worked around the clock to deliver an 82-page document within three days. Option A of Garthoff’s SALT paper permitted MIRVs and included a nation-wide deployment of a thick ABM system, reflecting the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Option B permitted MIRVs and limited ABMs to defend the National Command Authorities (NCA) in Moscow and Washington. Option C pleaded for a ban on both MIRVs and ABMs or alternatively for an NCA ABM limit. It reflected the State Department’s and ACDA’s position. Option D represented the Pentagon’s view. It allowed for MIRVs, pleaded for a reduction of offensive weapons and limited ABMs to an NCA level.¹⁰⁶

The four options were then reviewed at an NSC meeting on 8 April 1970, in a session later described by Kissinger as a “Kabuki play.”¹⁰⁷ Each department wanted to push through its position trying to find plausible arguments.¹⁰⁸ Anticipating this struggle, Kissinger urged Nixon

¹⁰⁴ Seymour Hersh gave his second SALT chapter the title “A Mistake becomes a Policy”. See Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the White House* (New York: Summit Books 1983), pp. 157–167.

¹⁰⁵ See National Security Decision Memorandum 49 “Preparation of Detailed SALT Options”, 27 March 1970, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 215–216.

¹⁰⁶ See Memorandum by Garthoff for the Members of the Verification Panel Working Group “SALT Options”, 4 April 1970, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, Institutional Files, Box H-005. A summary of the paper on “SALT Options” (dated 9 April 1970) is printed as enclosure to National Security Decision Memorandum 51 “Vienna Strategic Arms Limitation Talks”, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 232–252. For the context, see Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation, American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press 1994), p. 157; Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, pp. 256–259.

¹⁰⁷ See Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 542. Kabuki is a classical Japanese dance drama. Kabuki theatre is known for the stylization of its drama and for the elaborate make-up worn by some of its performers. Kissinger compared the NSC session on SALT with the “elusiveness” of a Kabuki play because each department put on a show invoking “complicated technical arguments in which the same facts were used to produce radically different conclusions”.

¹⁰⁸ See Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 220–228.

not to make a decision at the meeting.¹⁰⁹ Nixon followed Kissinger's advice. Therefore, a week before the negotiations started, the Nixon Administration still lacked an agreed SALT position. Nixon took a position when he met with the members of the SALT delegation three days after this "Kabuki play" at the NSC. He favored Option D, the Pentagon's position. Representing the State Department, Tommy Thompson confronted Nixon on the spot, arguing that the Soviets could never agree to reduce so many of its offensive strategic weapons built just over the last couple of years.¹¹⁰

As Nixon grew bored with the discussion, he let Kissinger choose from the four options. Kissinger selected option B. The White House put forward a proposal that satisfied Congressional pressure for a MIRV ban, but was unacceptable to the USSR. Kissinger added on-site inspections as a US proviso and, thus, made sure that the proposal for a MIRV ban could pass. In order to make sure that the Soviets would definitively not accept the MIRV-ban proposal, Kissinger demanded a ban for MIRV testing and deployment, but not for production. The Soviets reacted by advancing a proposal for MIRVs that called for a ban on production and deployment, but not on testing—and with no on-site inspections.¹¹¹ The American proposal foresaw a freeze of ICBM and SLBM launchers at the current American level of 1710. Moreover, it pleaded for annual reductions of 100 launchers over the next seven years.¹¹² It focused on cutting the number of Soviet land-based missiles, but left out the US Forward Based

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon "Meeting on SALT, Wednesday, April 8, 1970, 9:30 a.m.", no date, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, Institutional Files, Box H-027.

¹¹⁰ See Memorandum of Conversation between Nixon and the SALT Delegation, 11 April 1970, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 252–255.

¹¹¹ Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon "The Soviet SALT Proposal at Vienna", 23 April 1970, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 257–259.

¹¹² See Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 161.

System in Western Europe and Asia. It was rejected by the Soviets and the SALT negotiations were stalemated early on.

At the same time, there was enough common ground to find an earlier and more comprehensive agreement. The ABM issue is a case in point. When the American delegation introduced the idea for a NCA ABM limitation in April 1970 on behalf of Kissinger, the Soviet delegation quickly agreed. Kissinger’s preferred SALT option enabled the Soviet Union to keep its Moscow ABM system. The Soviets found the NCA level ABM proposal so appealing that they proposed to conclude a separate agreement on ABMs in 1970 through the Kissinger-Dobrynin backchannel.¹¹³ Kissinger rejected the idea. He thought that an early and separate agreement on ABM would deprive the United States of the ability to persuade Moscow to restrain its offensive weapons buildup.¹¹⁴ At Nixon’s instruction, Gerard Smith and his delegation submitted a new SALT proposal on 4 August 1970 offering the Soviet Union a choice between an ABM ban and capital defense. The Soviets had already accepted the US proposal of April 1970 to limit ABM to the defense of capitals and they adhered to this position. The Soviet rejection gave Nixon leverage to continue pursuing the deployment of the Safeguard ABM system. Finally, the ABM treaty of May 1972 allowed each side to have two ABM sites—one around the capital, the other around a missile site.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ See Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin (U.S. and USSR), 23 June 1970, in *SAR*, pp. 165–168.

¹¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin (U.S. and USSR), 9 July 1970, in *SAR*, pp. 170–178.

¹¹⁵ For a rich collection of documents on the evolution of the ABM negotiations, see William Burr, *The Secret History of the ABM Treaty, 1969–1972*. National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 60, Washington, D.C. 2001.

John McCloy, the Chairman of the General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament (GAC), anticipated that the USSR would turn down the US offer.¹¹⁶ McCloy urged Nixon to reach out to the Soviet leadership to negotiate on an ABM ban. McCloy was not willing to accept “as final the word of the Soviet negotiators.”¹¹⁷ Kissinger’s scientific advisors came to the same conclusion.¹¹⁸ His advisory group consisted of distinguished nuclear experts such as Paul Doty, Richard Garwin, Wolfgang Panofsky, Jack Ruina and Sidney Drell who briefed Kissinger since his early days as National Security Advisor. Comparing the implications of different ABM options, the nuclear scientists clearly favored an ABM ban as “the least costly, the least complex, the most stable and probably the most quickly negotiated of all the alternatives we have considered.”¹¹⁹ Along with the State Department and ACDA, McCloy’s Committee and Kissinger’s science advisers were in agreement that both a ban on MIRV and ABMs could be safely monitored by US intelligence without on-site inspections.¹²⁰

However, the White House and the Pentagon were opposed to a potential ABM ban that might have jeopardized the US MIRV deployment. Nixon wanted a SALT agreement that allowed the arms race to continue—allegedly to the benefit of the United States. In the spring of 1970, the alliance between the McCloy Committee and the arms controllers in the State Department and ACDA came up with a new initiative for a MIRV ban. McCloy criticized the

¹¹⁶ The General Advisory Committee for Arms Control and Disarmament was established by the Arms Control Act of 26 September 1961 to advise the President, the Secretary of State and the ACDA Director on matters relating to international arms control and disarmament.

¹¹⁷ Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon “McCloy Letter on SALT (of 27 June 1970), in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 878.

¹¹⁸ See Memorandum by the President’s Science Advisory Committee “Proposal for a Comprehensive Freeze on Strategic Weapons for SALT”, 6 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 873. For the context, see *Wang, In Sputnik’s Shadow*, pp. 287–310.

¹¹⁹ Memorandum by Paul Doty, Richard Garwin, Wolfgang Panofsky and Jack Ruina of the President’s Science Advisory Committee “Analysis of Alternative ABM Analysis in SALT”, 22 June 1970, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 878.

¹²⁰ See Memorandum from McCloy to Nixon, 30 May 1970, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 878.

official US MIRV proposal of April 1970 that contained onsite inspections as a proviso. He angrily wrote to Nixon that “it leaves us subject to the criticism that our proposal has not been a reasonable one and that rather than moving towards the stabilization of the present balance and the limitation of the number of warheads, we are moving toward an agreement which almost insures a new round of arms competition.” McCloy reiterated that “we doubt that a renunciation of MIRV would be negotiable at a later date if it ever becomes detached from the whole negotiating package.”¹²¹

Gerard Smith tried to find a way to conclude a last-minute MIRV ban before the first American MIRVs were to be deployed in 1971/1972. From a Soviet point of view, a MIRV flight ban was no longer acceptable as the United States had already successfully finished MIRV testing in summer 1970.¹²² From USSR’s vantage point, only a complete ban on tests, production and deployment was feasible. In December 1970, Gerard Smith saw new momentum for an ABM ban when the Soviets again offered the conclusion of a separate ABM agreement which allowed for capital defense.¹²³ Smith tried to convince Nixon that if they could muster domestic support for the deployment of an ABM system it could be used as a bargaining chip to make the Soviets halt their massive buildup of Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs).¹²⁴ Smith proposed that the United States abandon its insistence on simultaneous limits for both offensive and defensive weapons. In return, as Harold Brown of the SALT delegation had already

¹²¹ Letter from McCloy to Nixon, 27 June 1970, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 878.

¹²² Until June 1969, the United States had only conducted seven tests of MIRVed ICBMs. 21 more test were scheduled for the subsequent 12 months. See Memorandum from Haig to Nixon, 17 June 1969, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 845. See Memorandum from Haig to Nixon, June 17, 1969; NARA, Nixon, NSC, ABM/MIRV, Box 845.

¹²³ See Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin, 22 December 1970 (U.S. and USSR), in SAR, pp. 241–248.

¹²⁴ Memorandum from Smith to Nixon, 21 January 1971 “Safeguard FY 71 Budget Decision”, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 174–176.

suggested, the Nixon Administration could insist on an ABM ban which would then pave the way towards a MIRV ban.¹²⁵ Kissinger was furious that the “entire ABM issue was reopened again within the Administration.”¹²⁶ He urged Nixon to avoid the kind of public discussion on the ABM issue that Smith had envisaged.¹²⁷

Kissinger was eager to prevent an ABM ban. In January 1971, he took the initiative in his backchannel negotiations and brought up a new ABM proposal to kill the potential ban on ABM. Only two days after Gerard Smith’s idea for zero-ABM, Kissinger suggested Dobrynin that the USSR could keep its capital defense if the United States was allowed to construct three ABM sites for missile protection.¹²⁸ Throughout the first months of 1971, Kissinger and Dobrynin were negotiating on SALT in their backchannel. Until late in April, Dobrynin insisted that an agreement to limit offensive weapons had to be preceded by one on defensive weapons. It was on 23 April when Dobrynin, at instructions from the Soviet leadership, accepted that offensive limitations could be discussed before an ABM agreement was completed.¹²⁹ In fact, as Raymond Garthoff wrote, “the United States accepted a separate ABM agreement while the Soviet Union accepted the need to accompany it with some constraints on offensive weapons.”¹³⁰ Nixon sold the tacit agreement as a breakthrough on 20 May 1971.

In effect, a standstill agreement was not reached. It still remained to be determined what kind of offensive and ABM limitation was possible. Whereas Nixon and Kissinger were eager to

¹²⁵ See Letter from Brown to Kissinger and Smith, 23 December 1970, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 880.

¹²⁶ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 811.

¹²⁷ See Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon “Proposal from Gerry Smith for a Public Statement on our SALT Policy”, 26 January 1971, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 880.

¹²⁸ Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin, 23 January 1971, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 32, pp. 389–391.

¹²⁹ See Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin, 23 April 1971, in *SAR*, pp. 326–331.

¹³⁰ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 167.

allow for MIRVs and ABMs, the arms controllers still wanted to achieve a ban on MIRVs and ABM to prevent the next phase of the arms race. In May 1971, John McCloy warned Richard Nixon that simple numerical ceilings on ICBMs and SLBMs would allow for new arms competition in MIRVs.¹³¹ One possible way to stop the arms race was to conclude a separate ABM limitation agreement which—as Dean Rusk proposed—had to be hammered out immediately and could be ratified in Congress after a prospective agreement on offensive weapons.¹³² However, Nixon’s and Kissinger’s “breakthrough” on 20 May foreclosed this opportunity.

July 1971 saw perhaps the last chance for the conclusion of a comprehensive agreement including a ban on qualitative improvements such as MIRVs and ABM. At this time, Vladimir Semenov, the head of the Soviet SALT delegation, probed the chances for the conclusion of an ABM ban.¹³³ Gerard Smith wanted the Nixon Administration to submit a proposal for an ABM ban immediately, but Nixon blocked this idea, claiming it endangered the tacit agreement of 20 May. Nixon insisted that the Soviet Union was allowed to maintain the Moscow ABM system and that the United States keep its Safeguard system. Nixon wrote Smith that he was “very reluctant to introduce a complete ban as our preferred solution and thereby move the negotiations back into the realm of comprehensive agreements.”¹³⁴ Finally, the ABM Treaty permitted each signatory two ABM sites—one to defend their capital, the so-called National Command Authority (NCA), and one to defend an ICBM missile field.

¹³¹ See Memorandum from McCloy to Nixon, 12 May 1971, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 881.

¹³² Rusk proposed the idea in his capacity as a member of the McCloy committee. See Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon “Report of John McCloy’s Committee on SALT”, 25 May 1971, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 881.

¹³³ See Telegram from the U.S. SALT Delegation to Sec State (No. 854), 17 July 1971, pertaining to the conversation between Smith and Semenov the same day, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, SALT, Box 881.

¹³⁴ Draft Letter from Nixon to Smith, no date, in NARA, Nixon, NSC, Box 881.

The Failure of SALT II and the Crisis of US-Soviet Détente, 1972–1976

At the outset of Richard Nixon's second term, it was one of the administration's key objectives to develop a permanent SALT treaty with the Soviets to replace the Interim Agreement of 1972. However, the MIRV-Mistake cast an ever darker shadow on Nixon's and Kissinger's efforts to bring the arms race under control. The Soviets were working "frantically on MIRVs" and started MIRV testing in the summer of 1973.¹³⁵ The MIRV mistake began to turn against Nixon and Kissinger. In a personal memorandum to Nixon in April 1973, Kissinger noted that "unlimited deployment of MIRVs will greatly enhance the strategic posture of the Soviet Union and eventually could place us in a disadvantageous position."¹³⁶

Kissinger confided to Alexis Johnson, then head of the US delegation to the SALT II talks, that, "if we put no limits on their MIRVs, we are going to have an unbelievable strategic problem." Kissinger stressed that, "it doesn't do us any good if we get equally good MIRVs or even equally many, that just makes it a first strike world again."¹³⁷ Philip Odeen, one of Kissinger's top experts on SALT, came up with the decisive question: "What is the purpose and utility of SALT if MIRVs cannot be controlled?"¹³⁸ Within the first months of Nixon's second term, the President and Kissinger deemed that the pitfalls on the road towards the envisaged SALT II agreement were manifold. Nixon's summit with Brezhnev in Washington in June 1973 did not bring any progress. Nixon could only reassure Brezhnev that he had "every intention of

¹³⁵ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Jackson, 11 June 1973, in NARA, Nixon, HAK Telcons, Box 20.

¹³⁶ Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, April 1973, "SALT MIRV Limitations", no date, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 33 (SALT II, 1972–1980), p. 91.

¹³⁷ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Johnson, 6 March 1973, in NARA, Nixon, HAK Telcons, Box 19.

¹³⁸ Memorandum from Odeen to Kissinger "SALT without MIRV?", 15 May 1973, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 33, p. 84.

concluding an agreement that is more complete than the existing one, and that we will do so within a reasonable period of time.”¹³⁹

It was predictable that America’s land-based deterrent would eventually become more vulnerable to a Soviet attack if the Nixon Administration failed to achieve a limit for the Soviet Union’s MIRVed ICBM launchers. Hence, Kissinger was eager to obtain a freeze on MIRVs, banning tests of land-based Soviet ICBMs for the duration of the Interim Agreement. When he presented this proposal at the Politburo’s hunting estate in Zavidovo in May 1973, Brezhnev flatly rejected it.¹⁴⁰ Nixon did not even raise the subject with Brezhnev at their Washington Summit in June 1973. It was ridiculous to demand that “the U.S. can have MIRVs on their land-based ICBMs but the USSR be frozen out of them.”¹⁴¹ In private, Kissinger considered the American stance on MIRVs “so cynical that I’m embarrassed to put it forward.”¹⁴² Thus, in the first half of 1974, the White House tried to at least limit the Soviet advantage in throw weight by putting forward a proposal that would offset unequal overall aggregates in the Soviet favor by unequal levels of MIRVs in the American favor. Yet, Kissinger’s initiative in the March of 1974 failed because Brezhnev insisted on equal MIRV limits.¹⁴³

In summer 1974, Nixon’s impending impeachment certainly contributed to the crisis in US-Soviet relations. The Soviet leadership was reluctant to conclude a far-reaching strategic

¹³⁹ Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, “Your Initial Meeting with Brezhnev”, June 1973, no date, in NARA, NSC, HAK Office Files, Box 75.

¹⁴⁰ See Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Brezhnev, 7 May 1973, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 15 (Soviet Union, June 1972–August 1974), pp. 385–398.

¹⁴¹ Kissinger anticipated that Brezhnev’s concept of “equal security” implied that “MIRVs must be treated exactly the same on both sides”. Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, “Your Initial Meeting with Brezhnev”, June 1973, no date, in NARA, NSC, HAK Office Files, Box 75.

¹⁴² Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Schlesinger, 16 August 1973, in NARA, Nixon, HAK Telcons, Box 21.

¹⁴³ Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger and Brezhnev, 25 March 1974, in *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 33, pp. 226–237.

arms agreement with a tremendously weakened President. But there is more to it: US-Soviet détente was in “bad shape” because the Nixon Administration had “nothing left to offer the Soviets.”¹⁴⁴ There was no bargaining chip left to convince the Soviets to slow down their MIRV program. Privately, Kissinger even toyed with the idea to abandon either the B 1 bomber or the Trident submarine program in order to buy Soviet concessions.¹⁴⁵ For the time being, Brezhnev saved the SALT process through considerable concessions: He agreed to a common MIRV ceiling of 1320 launchers at his first meeting with Gerald Ford in Vladivostok in November 1974. In addition, he dropped the traditional Soviet demands to compensate for the American Forward Based Systems in Europe.¹⁴⁶ Soviet motives behind this major move are not entirely clear. It might be that Brezhnev’s concessions were intended to help Ford prevail over the mighty domestic détente critics.

Yet, in 1975, it became evident that the Vladivostok package was merely a tentative outline for a SALT II accord. Two contentious issues were still unresolved.¹⁴⁷ The Vladivostok formula lacked a solution for the Soviet Backfire bomber and US cruise missiles. The USSR did not want the Backfire to be categorized as a heavy bomber, arguing that it was not a strategic

¹⁴⁴ Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Schlesinger, 29 March 1974, in NARA, Nixon, HAK Telcons, Box 25.

¹⁴⁵ For Kissinger’s considerations to abandon the B 1 bomber, see Memorandum of Conversation between Kissinger/Schlesinger/Scowcroft, 23 April 1974, in Gerald R. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Memoranda of Conversations, 1973–1977, Box 3. Vis-à-vis Dobrynin, Kissinger toyed with the idea to terminate the Trident program, see Transcript of Telephone Conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin, 24 April 1974, in NARA, Nixon, HAK Telcons, Box 27. Both ideas indicate that Kissinger was not yet willing to use the Forward Based Systems in Europe as a bargaining chip

¹⁴⁶ For the transcript of the meeting between Ford and Brezhnev on 24 November 1974, see *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 33, pp. 381–389. For the meeting transcripts of 23 November 1974, see *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 16 (Soviet Union, August 1974–December 1976), pp. 320–350. See also Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1999), pp. 286–298.

¹⁴⁷ The tentative Vladivostok agreement raised criticism in the United States. Albeit the Soviets agreed to an equal overall aggregate for launchers (2400 for each side) and to a common ceiling for MIRVs (1320 for each side), the Vladivostok agreements perpetuated Soviet supremacy in terms of missile throw-weight, that is the payload ICBMs can deliver. On the throw-weight criticism, see Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, pp. 342–344.

weapon. Ford and Kissinger did not want to count cruise missiles as single launchers.¹⁴⁸

President Ford shied away from pursuing the conclusion of SALT II. Kissinger was in a precarious position: On the one hand, he was committed to conclude a SALT II accord in advance of the 1976 Presidential election. On the other hand, anything he fell off would have been judged as betrayal by the domestic détente critics.¹⁴⁹ The SALT negotiations reached a dead end. President Jimmy Carter inherited a difficult arms control legacy.

¹⁴⁸ Kissinger tried to sort out the difficulties pertaining to the treatment of the Backfire Bomber and Cruise Missiles on his last trip to Moscow in January 1976. For his conversations with Brezhnev on 21 and 22 January 1976, see *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. 16, pp. 917–991. For Kissinger’s account on his last journey to Moscow, see Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 853–861.

¹⁴⁹ Minutes of Kissinger’s Staff Meeting on SALT, 26 June 1975, in NARA, RG 59, Records of the Counselor 1955–1977 (Sonnenfeldt Files), Box 6.