NEGOTIATING PRIMACY: STRATEGIC STABILITY, SUPERPOWER ARMS CONTROL, AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

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The United States successfully used the concept of strategic stability to tip the nuclear balance against the Soviet Union during the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) of the 1980s and early 1990s. Both superpowers sought to employ strategic stability to legitimate their objectives for START, but differed significantly over how it should be operationalized in an arms control agreement. Despite appearances, the 1991 START I treaty did not reflect the reconciliation of these two divergent views of strategic stability, but rather the triumph of Washington's conception over Moscow's, thereby laying the groundwork for arms control in an era of US military primacy.

What role has the concept of strategic stability played in the formulation of strategic arms control agreements? Scholarship has long held that strategic stability formed the conceptual basis of cooperation between the United States and Soviet Union, made manifest by the limitation and reduction of their arms in a way that lowered incentives for nuclear first use. Informed by the insights of arms control theorists, most notably Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, US policymakers allegedly sought to cooperate with the Soviet Union to embed strategic stability as the cornerstone of arms control agreements.[1] Arms control, theorists argued, could constrain the incentives of Washington and Moscow to launch a nuclear attack against the other by placing limits on counterforce-capable offensive weapons—weapons that can destroy the other side's nuclear forces—as well as on defensive systems able to absorb a so-called "ragged retaliatory" blow after a first strike. This approach also could incentivize the construction of survivable forces able to ride out a nuclear attack and retaliate. In preserving mutual vulnerability to a devastating nuclear response, arms control agreements would support two aspects of strategic stability: crisis stability (low incentives to strike first during a period of high tension) and arms-race stability (low incentives to engage in competitive armaments programs).[2]

Recent scholars, writing about the US-Soviet Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) of the 1970s, have questioned this view and argued that Washington pursued a far more competitive approach to arms control that sought to limit Soviet numerical and other advantages, while leaving US strengths in high technology, particularly in destabilizing counterforce systems, unconstrained.[3] This article argues that, despite using the language of strategic stability to define its arms control objectives, the United States continued this competitive approach into the 1980s. It explains how the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush adopted the rhetoric but adapted the substance of the traditional Schelling-Halperin conception of strategic stability to support the reshaping of the US-Soviet nuclear balance in ways that favored the United States. By successfully placing this new conception of strategic stability at the heart of US-Soviet strategic arms reduction at the end of the Cold War, the Reagan and Bush administrations laid the basis for a new phase of post–Cold War US-Russia strategic arms control that supported Washington's military primacy. We still live in this post–Cold War era of

1 Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Brookings Institution Press, 1994); Michael Krepon, *Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace* (Stanford University Press, 2021); Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Cornell University Press, 1992); Robert Jervis, "Arms Control, Stability, and the Causes of War," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 239–254; Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (Twentieth Century Fund, 1961); Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk: The Story of the First Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (Doubleday, 1980); Strobe Talbott, *Endgame: The Inside Story of SALT II* (Harper and Row, 1979).

2 Michael S. Gerson, "The Origins of Strategic Stability: The United States and the Threat of Surprise Attack," in Elbridge A. Colby and Michael S. Gerson, eds., *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations* (US Army War College Press, 2013), 1–46; Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (Twentieth Century Fund, 1961); James Acton, "Reclaiming Strategic Stability," in Elbridge A. Colby and Michael S. Gerson, eds., *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations* (US Army War College Press, 2013), 117–46.

3 Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); John D. Maurer, *Competitive Arms Control: Nixon, Kissinger, and SALT, 1969–1972* (Yale University Press, 2022); John D. Maurer, "The Purposes of Arms Control," *Texas National Security Review 2*, no. 1 (November 2018): 8–27; Niccolò Petrelli and Giordana Pulcini, "Nuclear Superiority in the Age of Parity: US Planning, Intelligence Analysis, Weapons Innovation and the Search for a Qualitative Edge, 1969–1976," *The International History Review* 40, no. 5 (2018): 1191–1209.

strategic arms control, at least until the scheduled 2026 expiry of the 2010 New START treaty.[4]

Despite recent reevaluation of the strategic arms limitation negotiations of the 1970s, the portrayal by historians (with a few exceptions) of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks of the 1980s and early 1990s has remained largely focused on how the negotiations marked a significant step forward for stabilizing reductions in nuclear arms.[5] The first agreement to see major cuts in both strategic nuclear delivery vehicles and warheads, "rather than [the] mere freeze" that had characterized the SALT agreements, the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) is still generally seen by scholars as a significant advance for superpower arms control.[6] For example, while criticizing certain imbalances, Michael Krepon's recent history of arms control praises START I as a key element of arms control's "apogee" of success during the late 1980s and early 1990s.[7]

Analysts highlight not only START I's steep reductions but also its coherent vision of strategic stability as a step forward for arms control.[8] During the START negotiations, as both US and Russian arms control observers have argued, Washington and Moscow established a better common understanding of strategic stability as the conceptual basis for reductions.[9] This observation seems obvious from the text of the treaty and the way the US government portrayed it at the time: The START I preamble "recogniz[es]... the strengthening of strategic stability" as in the interests of "both" the United States and Soviet Union, as well as "international security."[10] This combination of reductions based on the principle of stability, the US government argued, was what made START I such a valuable contribution to arms control.[11]

In fact, this article argues, rather than forming the conceptual basis for superpower cooperation, both sides used competing visions of strategic stability to legitimate and advance their competing arms control agendas. After a backlash against the US nuclear buildup and approach to arms control in the early 1980s, the administration of President Reagan reformulated the traditional Schelling-Halperin conception of strategic stability to legitimate its policies, both domestically and internationally. Rather than a clear rejection of the existing conception of strategic stability and explicit embrace of competition,[12] Reagan's new formulation emphasized the stabilizing characteristics of new US systems, including offensive weapons and the Stra-

By contrast, the Soviet formulation of strategic stability was designed to constrain the Reagan administration's nuclear buildup by emphasizing a more traditional vision of the concept, grounded in preserving mutual vulnerability between the two superpowers.

4 Scholars who have begun to reevaluate the Strategic Arms Reduction talks both from a conceptual and policy standpoint include Nancy W. Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable: Arms Control in the Twenty-First Century," *The Nonproliferation Review* 22, nos. 3–4, 469–98; John D. Maurer, "The Forgotten Side of Arms Control: Enhancing US Competitive Advantage, Offsetting Enemy Strengths," *War on the Rocks*, June 27, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/the-forgotten-side-of-arms-control-enhancing-u-s-competitive-advantage-offsetting-enemy-strengths/; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 119–31; Joshua Shifrinson, "'Keeping Them Well Behind': The United States, Soviet Decline, and the Shape of European Security at the Cold War's End," in Nuno P. Monteiro and Fritz Bartel, eds., *Before and After the Fall: World Politics and the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 78–94. On nuclear weapons and US military primacy, see Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of US Primacy," *International Security* 30, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 7–44; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 9–49.

5 Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 469–98; Maurer, "The Forgotten Side of Arms Control"; Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants,* 119–131; Shifrinson, "'Keeping Them Well Behind,'" 78–94.

6 Jessica Rogers, Matt Korda, and Hans M. Kristensen, "The Long View: Strategic Arms Control After the New START Treaty," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 78, no. 6 (2022): 347–68; "START I Entry into Force," US Department of State Factsheet, July 12, 1995, https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/arms/factsheets/wmd/nuclear/start1/starteif.html.

7 Michael Krepon, *Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace: The Rise, Demise, and Revival of Arms Control* (Stanford University Press, 2021), 265–305.

8 Kerry M. Kartchner, *Negotiating START: Strategic Arms Reduction Talks and the Quest for Strategic Stability* (Transaction Publishers, 1992), 4; Acton, "Reclaiming Strategic Stability," 137.

9 Anton K. Anufriev, Interview with Alexey Arbatov, May 7, 2024, https://pircenter.org/en/editions/past-treaties-have-fulfilled-their-purpose-they-have-established-such-strategic-stability-that-even-in-the-current-almost-direct-confrontation-nobody-worries-about-the-threat-of-strategic-weapons-inte/; William Alberque, "Russia, the US, and the Post-New START Agenda," August 6, 2021, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2021/08/russia-us-post-new-start-agenda/.

10 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms [START I]," July 31, 1991, https://www.acq.osd.mil/asda/ssipm/sdc/tc/start1/START1text.html.

11 "START I Entry into Force."

12 Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 475–78.

tegic Defense Initiative (SDI) missile defense program. At the same time, the administration downplayed US offensive forces' increasingly effective counterforce capabilities and the destabilizing potential of missile defenses. Furthermore, the administration highlighted the destabilizing characteristics of Soviet systems it wanted to reduce through arms control, principally heavy intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). The Reagan administration thereby used the rhetoric of strategic stability to legitimate its attempt to tip the nuclear balance against the Soviet Union.

By contrast, the Soviet formulation of strategic stability was designed to constrain the Reagan administration's nuclear buildup by emphasizing a more traditional vision of the concept, grounded in preserving mutual vulnerability between the two superpowers. The Soviet Union faced a growing threat from the United States' new offensive counterforce systems to the survivability of its ICBMs, which constituted the backbone of the Soviet strategic forces. This threat was worsened by the prospect of a new generation of US missile defenses that could absorb any retaliation Moscow could launch after a US first strike. Moscow's START position therefore pushed for reciprocal limitations on high-tech strategic offensive and defensive forces as the best means to neutralize areas of US competitive advantage and preserve its ability to inflict unacceptable damage on the United States, even if Washington attacked first. Moscow saw this approach as the best way to preserve the viability of its strategic deterrent.

As START progressed, however, the United States' conception of strategic stability triumphed over the Soviet Union's. This development led, as Nancy Gallagher has argued, to arms control that "fit Reagan's logic for strategic stability" more than the Schelling-Halperin or Soviet conception.[13] Strategic arms reductions under START I, based on this Reaganite vision of strategic stability, downplayed the destabilizing potential of US high-technology counterforce systems, leaving them relatively unconstrained, while emphasizing the destabilizing characteristics of Soviet weapons that were of greatest US concern and prioritizing those weapons for cuts. This article explains how the United States successfully used the concept of strategic stability not as a framework for superpower compromise based on mutual vulnerability, but as a tool to reshape the nuclear balance in its favor at the end of the Cold War and to lay the basis for post–Cold War US-Russia arms control.[14] In doing so, this article contributes to our understanding of the role of nonproliferation and arms control policy in supporting the military dimension of the United States' grand strategy of primacy.[15]

This interpretation also helps to explain the fundamental continuity in the Reagan administration's approach to the Soviet Union. Reagan assumed office in 1981 committed to aggressively competing with Moscow across the board. Yet historians have argued that in the second half of the 1980s—in the wake of the "war scare" of 1983 and under pressure from antinuclear campaigners—the administration pivoted to engagement with the Soviet Union, facilitated in part by Reagan's and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's personal connection and shared hatred of nuclear weapons.[16] In arguing that the Reagan administration used strategic stability as a means to legitimate its policy of restructuring the nuclear balance in its favor through nominally cooperative negotiations, this article seeks to add to our understanding of how the United States pursued a consistently competitive strategy toward the Soviet Union during the late Cold War under the guise of a more cooperative approach on nuclear and other issues.[17]

13 Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 477.

14 Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 477–79.

15 Francis J. Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition: US Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation," *International Security* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2015): 9–46; Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2020); Jonathan R. Hunt, *The Nuclear Club: How America and the World Policed the Atom from Hiroshima to Vietnam* (Stanford University Press, 2022); Shane J. Maddock, *Nuclear Apartheid: The Quest for American Atomic Supremacy from World War II to the Present* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

16 Beth A. Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (University of Missouri Press, 1997); David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: Reagan, Gorbachev and the Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race* (Icon Books, 2018); Krepon, Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace, 193–261; Melvyn P. Leffler, "Ronald Reagan and the Cold War," in Jonathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles, eds., *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s* (Cornell University Press, 2021), 25–42; Stephanie Freeman, *Dreams for a Decade: International Nuclear Abolitionism and the End of the Cold War* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023); Stephanie Freeman, "Ronald Reagan and the Nuclear Freeze Movement," in Jonathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles, eds., *The Reagan Moment: American and the World in the 1980s* (Cornell University Press, 2021), 144–61; Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1990* (Poseidon Press, 1991); James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2014); Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 143–91.

17 Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: US Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Cornell University Press, 2016), 68–118; Anthony M. Eames, *A Voice in Their Own Destiny: Reagan, Thatcher, and Public Diplomacy in the Nuclear 1980s* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2023); Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 475–77; William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan in the White House and the World* (Dutton, 2022); Simon Miles, "Peace Through Strength and Quiet Diplomacy: Grand Strategy Lessons from the Reagan Administration," in Nuno P. Monteiro and Fritz Bartel, eds., *Before and After the Fall: World Politics and the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 62–77; Mary E. Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create a Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Mary E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Stalemate* (Yale University Press, 2021); Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants,* 119–31; Shifrinson, "'Keeping Them Well Behind,'" 78–94.

The article begins by defining the Schelling-Halperin concept of strategic stability and explaining the general state of the strategic balance in the late 1970s and early 1980s, prior to the START negotiations. Next, the roots of the differing US and Soviet conceptions of strategic stability are explored, contextualizing them as functions of this evolving strategic balance. The third section of this article shows how the final START I agreement embodied a conception of strategic stability far closer to the US conception than the Soviet Union's. The fourth part accounts for the centrality of strategic stability to START I by explaining why the Soviet Union continued to describe the final agreement in those terms even though it had largely failed to embed its conception in the treaty. The article concludes by reflecting on the legacy of this US strategy of securing primacy through negotiation for arms control today.

The Original Conception of Strategic Stability

Though it built on previous work, Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin's 1961 book *Strategy and Arms Control* is commonly cited as a foundational text in the early articulation of strategic stability as a fundamental objective for arms control.[18] The enormous destructive power of nuclear weapons, Schelling and Halperin posited, combined with the increasing speed at which new systems such as ICBMs could deliver them, created an extremely dangerous situation. Nuclear war would be incredibly destructive, but if a nuclear exchange was inevitable, "an enormous advantage" was obtained in launching a counterforce first strike, which would be designed to destroy a large proportion of the enemy's nuclear forces and to limit damage to the first mover to the maximum extent possible.[19] Under these conditions, any attacked state would necessarily need to respond quickly to a first strike, both to deter nuclear war and maximize damage to the attacker. Both sides understood this situation, Schelling and Halperin argued, meaning that they were posturing their forces with high readiness to strike first, or, if an attack was underway, to be "a close second."[20] By placing a high premium on launching a first strike, or at least responding quickly to an attack, these conditions increased the risk of a nuclear war that neither side wanted during a crisis. "Hardly anything would be as tragically ironic," Schelling and Halperin reflected, "as a war that both sides started, each in the belief that the other was about to, each compelled by its expectations to confirm the other's belief that an attack was imminent."[21]

Key to achieving this goal would be to take steps to reduce the vulnerability of both sides' forces to an attack, thereby reducing both the first-strike advantage and the disadvantages of a slow response.

Arms control, Schelling and Halperin argued, should focus on reducing this preemptive strike incentive, and thereby the risk of war, by "reduc[ing] [both] the ability of weapons to achieve advantage by going quickly, and to suffer a great disadvantage by responding slowly."[22] Key to achieving this goal would be to take steps to reduce the vulnerability of both sides' forces to an attack, thereby reducing both the first-strike advantage and the disadvantages of a slow response. To achieve this, Schelling and Halperin postulated that arms control could include "agreement to develop and acquire weapons of a character relatively better for retaliation than for achieving surprise."[23] This strategy could include measures such as limiting the accuracy of offensive systems that could carry out a counterforce first strike or banning defensive systems that could protect the striking state against the ragged retaliatory blow from the target of such an attack. Schelling and Halperin argued that arms control should also encourage the development of weapons systems that could survive an attack, through either stealth or protection, and retaliate.[24]

18 Linton F. Brooks, "The End of Arms Control?" *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 84–85; Gerson, "The Origins of Strategic Stability," 32–36; Robert Jervis, "Arms Control, Stability, and Causes of War," *Daedalus* 120, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 167–81; Heather Williams, "Asymmetric Arms Control and Strategic Stability: Scenarios for Limiting Hypersonic Glide Vehicles," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 789–813; Gregory D. Koblentz, *Strategic Stability in the Second Nuclear Age*, Council on Foreign Relations Special Report, no. 71 (November 2014): 19.

19 Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, 9, 53.

20 Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, 9.

21 Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, 9.

22 Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, 10

23 Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, 12.

24 Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, 12, 51–54.

While not the only measures Schelling and Halperin proposed, efforts to structure both sides' forces in such a way as to preserve both the United States' and Soviet Union's ability to ride out a first strike and retaliate against the other were key for creating stability, which Schelling and Halperin defined as "a situation in which the incentives on both sides to initiate war are outweighed by the disincentives" in a way that is "reasonably secure against shocks, alarms and perturbations."[25] Thus, under the formulation defined by Schelling and Halperin, stability would be based on US and Soviet mutual vulnerability to nuclear retaliation—a concept later popularized, and criticized, as "mutual assured destruction," or MAD.[26] Schelling and Halperin noted that negotiations of such a condition of stability through arms control agreements could not only reduce incentives for both sides to strike first in a crisis, but could also slow the US-Soviet arms race by limiting the ability of both sides to make technological advances that could put the assured retaliatory capability of the other in jeopardy. The authors thus outlined the fundamentals of crisis stability, arms race stability, and thereby strategic stability (the combination of the two), even if they did not use those exact terms.[27]

An elegant and powerful formulation for limiting the risk of nuclear war and arms racing behavior, Schelling and Halperin's work on stability provided an intellectual foundation for US arms control advocates as they pressed the case for US-Soviet agreements from the late 1960s onwards. Yet, despite the prominence of stability as a concept and the signature of major arms control accords such as the 1972 US-Soviet ABM Treaty and Interim Agreement on Strategic Offensive Arms, by the late 1970s the superpower strategic balance had evolved in such a way that bore only tangential relation to Schelling and Halperin's prescriptions. This development was particularly true in regards to offensive forces. The Interim Agreement had capped numbers of offensive land- and sea-based strategic missile launchers on both sides, but had done nothing to limit multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV)—the arming of an offensive ballistic missile with more than one warhead. Through a combination of increasing the number of attacking warheads on each offensive missile and facilitating increased accuracy for these warheads, MIRV technology made a counterforce strike on land-based strategic forces more feasible. As Schelling himself recognized, the Interim Agreement's cap on offensive missile launchers—which limited the growth of a large proportion of counterforce targets—further exacerbated this unstable situation.[28]

This situation asymmetrically favored the United States.[29] The United States was the first to deploy MIRV warheads on both its land- and sea-based missile forces, in 1970 and 1971 respectively, giving the US a significant lead in the number of MIRVs fielded as well as a head start in improving the technology's accuracy for counterforce attacks. The Soviet Union deployed its first MIRVed ICBM in 1974, but, unbeknownst to the United States, Moscow struggled with achieving accuracies sufficient for counterforce strikes.[30] The Soviet Union also experienced setbacks in the development of MIRVs for its submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and the first MIRVed Soviet SLBM was not deployed until 1979.[31] Moreover, for a combination of geographic, technological, and bureaucratic reasons, the Soviet Union was more reliant on its more fixed, silo-based ICBM force, which was vulnerable to attack with MIRVs, than the United States, which deployed an increasing proportion of its strategic warheads at sea on hard-to-find and therefore more survivable nuclear ballistic missile submarines.[32] By 1980, the United States estimated that the Soviet Union deployed 75 percent of its strategic nuclear warheads on ICBMs and 20 percent on SLBMs. For Washington, the figures were almost the exact reverse: It deployed 24 percent of its warheads on ICBMs and 50 percent on SLBMs.[33] This combination of an increasingly counterforce-capable, but survivable, sea-based US strategic posture and a more vulnerable, predominantly land-based, Soviet strategic posture made a far higher proportion of Soviet forces vulnerable to a counterforce strike by the United States than vice

25 Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, 50–51.

26 Donald G. Brennan, "Strategic Alternatives: I," *The New York Times*, May 24, 1971, 31.

27 Schelling and Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control*, 37–38.

28 Thomas C. Schelling, "What Went Wrong with Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 2 (Winter 1985): 219–33.

29 Maurer, "The Forgotten Side of Arms Control."

30 Pavel Podvig, "The Window of Vulnerability that Wasn't: Soviet Military Buildup in the 1970s—A Research Note," *International Security* 33, no. 1, 118–38.

31 Steven J. Zaloga, *The Kremlin's Nuclear Sword: The Rise and Fall of Russia's Strategic Nuclear Forces*, 1945–2000 (Smithsonian Books, 2002), 157–59.

32 Nikolai Sokov, *Russian Strategic Modernization: The Past and Future* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 21–42.

33 Harold Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report Fiscal Year 1981* (US Government Printing Office, 1980), 89.

versa.[34] Furthermore, this trend would become more unfavorable to the Soviet Union as US counterforce capabilities improved. Thus, by the early 1980s, the strategic balance was becoming increasingly unstable, but in a way that placed the United States at a technological advantage, thereby increasing US incentives for a first strike to a far greater extent than for the Soviet Union.

Yet rather than focusing on these asymmetries in a manner that could preserve mutual vulnerability in a balanced way, during the 1970s and into the 1980s the US government's conception of strategic stability evolved to become focused almost exclusively on the Soviet threat to Washington's relatively minor land-based ICBM force, while downplaying or ignoring the destabilizing characteristics of the United States' own strategic forces. The next section explains why.

The Evolving US Conception of Strategic Stability

Before the mid-1970s, the US understanding of strategic stability was largely synonymous with the Schelling-Halperin conception of the term. Only Americans advocating for the Schelling-Halperin conception of stability through mutual vulnerability described US strategic arms control objectives in terms of strategic stability. This group, which John D. Maurer has labeled "cooperative arms controllers," came to include President Richard Nixon's head of the US delegation to SALT I, Gerard Smith, and Secretary of State William Rogers. These advocates argued for limitations on systems that would endanger mutual vulnerability, such as MIRVs and antiballistic missile systems (ABMs), often against the resistance of "competitive arms controllers" who wanted to preserve US leads in these technologies as much as possible.[35] Cooperative arms controllers also advocated for the SALT I agreements in Congress on the basis that they would enhance strategic stability.[36] Competitive arms controllers such as Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird did not use the term, while Nixon—a private skeptic of stability through mutual vulnerability—did not employ it in any of his speeches that addressed SALT.[37]

During the SALT II talks (1972–1979), however, competitive arms controllers began to discuss the threat that Soviet heavy MIRVed ICBMs posed to the US Minuteman ICBM force in terms of the danger these weapons posed to strategic stability.[38] Without limits on MIRVed ICBMs, US officials argued in February 1974, "a [previously] strategically meaningless Soviet ICBM number and throw weight advantage"—the measure of a missile's payload and therefore the number of MIRVs it could carry—"could open up counterforce options for the Soviets that would be unavailable to the US and destabilizing."[39] US arms control proposals across the Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter administrations prioritized limitations on the throw weight of Soviet ICBMs, as well as Moscow's ability to convert that throw weight into a larger number of MIRVs.[40]

Former Deputy Secretary of Defense and Nixon administration arms control official Paul H. Nitze's widely read *Foreign Affairs* article, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," solidified the links between the heavy Soviet ICBM threat, the growing vulnerability of the United States' Minuteman ICBM force, and strategic stability.[41] Without addressing the "one-sided instability" that stemmed from Moscow's resulting counterforce advantage through SALT, Nitze claimed, the United States "would be conceding to the

34 Brendan Green and Austin Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There: Soviet Reactions to the Late Cold War Nuclear Balance," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (2017), 606–41.

35 Maurer, *Competitive Arms Control*, 1–14; John D. Maurer, "Divided Counsels: Competing Approaches to SALT, 1969–1970," *Diplomatic History* 43, no. 2 (April 2019): 353–77.

36 "Statement by ACDA Director Smith to the Senate Armed Services Committee: Strategic Arms Limitation Agreements," June 28, 1972, United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *Documents on Disarmament* (US Government Printing Office, 1972), 422–29.

37 "Statement by Secretary of Defense Laird to the Senate Armed Services Committee: Strategic Arms Limitation Agreements," June 20, 1972, *Documents on Disarmament*, 368–71; Richard M. Nixon, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress on Return from Austria, the Soviet Union, Iran, and Poland," June 1, 1972, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/254910; Richard M. Nixon, "Remarks on Signing a Joint Resolution Approving the Interim Agreement with the Soviet Union on the Limitation of Strategic Arms," September 30, 1972, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255117; Richard M. Nixon, "Remarks at a Ceremony Marking Entry into Force of the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems and the Interim Agreement on the Limitation of Strategic Arms," October 3, 1972, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255127; Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 104–19.

38 James Cameron, "Soviet–American Strategic Arms Limitation and the Limits of Co-operative Competition," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 33, no. 1 (2022): 116–119, doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2022.2041812; James Cameron, "Undermining the Balance: MIRV Exclusion, SALT I, and Strategic Instability," in Giles David Arcenaux, Stephen Herzog, and Ariel Petrovics, eds., *Atomic Backfires: When Nuclear Policies Fail* (MIT Press, forthcoming).

39 "Memorandum from Jan Lodal of the National Security Council Staff and the Counselor of the Department of State (Sonnenfeldt) to Secretary of State Kissinger," February 5, 1974, in Erin R. Mahan, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter FRUS], *1969-1976. SALT II, 1972–1980,* XXXIII (Government Printing Office, 2013), 192.

40 "Presidential Directive/NSC-7, March 23, 1977," FRUS XXXIII, 684–86; Cameron, "Soviet–American Strategic Arms Limitation," 116–19; Cameron, "Undermining the Balance."

41 James Graham Wilson, *America's Cold Warrior: Paul Nitze and National Security from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Cornell University Press, 2024), 172–74; Cameron, "Undermining the Balance."

Soviet Union the potential for a military and political victory if deterrence failed."[42] The allegation that SALT II was destabilizing because it did not address Soviet missile throw weight advantages focused the US public debate on a definition of strategic stability that was concerned with the destabilizing character of Soviet forces only, and concentrated narrowly on the vulnerability of the US land-based ICBM force, rather than a broader definition of strategic stability based on bilateral adjustments to preserve mutual vulnerability in the Schelling-Halperin mold.[43]

Successive administrations' efforts to elide the destabilizing characteristics of new US systems contributed to the one-sided nature of the US conception of strategic stability.

Successive administrations' efforts to elide the destabilizing characteristics of new US systems contributed to the one-sided nature of the US conception of strategic stability. Faced with congressional opposition to new nuclear weapons programs, the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations framed US nuclear modernization as stabilizing by emphasizing how new systems increased the survivability of US forces, while understating or omitting their counterforce capabilities.[44] President Carter's Secretary of Defense Harold Brown defended the new counterforce-capable Missile Experimental (MX) ICBM as stabilizing because it would be housed in a survivable basing mode. More ambitiously, Brown argued that MX would be "conducive to stability," despite its counterforce capability, because its counterforce potential would require the Soviets to spend more to protect their silo-based forces at the expense of new "even less benign programs." Brown also emphasized how the new Trident SLBMs, as well as B-52 bombers equipped with air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs), would increase the total number of deliverable warheads in a second strike without directly addressing their first-strike potential.[45]

The Reagan administration built on these arguments. The administration's position on arms control, including the role of strategic stability, was informed by the views of some of SALT II's most prominent critics, including Reagan himself, as well as Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Eugene Rostow, and Nitze, who was appointed Chief US Negotiator for the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Negotiations.[46] A key goal of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Talks, according to the National Security Council staff, was "strategic stability," by which it meant "reducing the vulnerability of US strategic forces," including through "significant constraints on the most threatening Soviet systems—ICBMs."[47]

The Reagan administration viewed MIRVed ICBMs, with their combination of accuracy, short flight time to target, and vulnerability combined with a quick reaction time, as the most dangerous counterforce weapon, so their control and reduction had to be prioritized above other arms. "We have to reduce the first-strike sudden threat of the missiles," Reagan noted to the National Security Council in April 1982. He continued: "The bombers take 12 hours to arrive and are easier to spot. The submarines are not so accurate; and both the submarines and bombers can be attacked before they shoot their missiles."[48]

Reagan also grasped the essence, if not the detail, of the US position on bombers and SLBMs throughout START: These weapons were less destabilizing, according to the administration's argument, because they were more able to ride out an attack in an era of high-accuracy MIRVs than were ICBMs in fixed silos, which would be extremely vulnerable to counterforce, but their use would also give the administration enough time to launch on warning of an incoming attack. A state, such as the Soviet Union, that relied on ICBMs for the backbone of its nuclear deterrent would thus face significant incentives to launch them before they were destroyed in a first strike (the use-them-or-lose them dilemma). In the short term, both SLBMs and bombers possessed characteristics that would limit their first-strike potential: high visibility for bombers and inaccuracy for SLBMs. Left out of this definition were advances in US technology that

42 Paul H. Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," *Foreign Affairs* 54, no. 2 (January 1976): 207–32.

43 Cameron, "Undermining the Balance."

44 Green, *The Revolution that Failed*, 129–32, 148–50; Cameron, "Undermining the Balance."

45 Harold Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report Fiscal Year 1981* (US Government Printing Office, 1980), 85–91.

46 Eames, *A Voice in Their Own Destiny*, 17–23; Wilson, *America's Cold Warrior*, 192–211.

47 "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Clark) to President Reagan," April 20, 1982, Tab A1, James Graham Wilson, ed., *FRUS, 1981–1988, START I*, XI (US Government Printing Office, 2021), 17.

48 "Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting," April 21, 1982, *FRUS* XI, 33.

were already under development, such as stealth and improved missile guidance, which would make these systems more potent first-strike weapons. In his comment regarding the vulnerability of ballistic missile submarines to attack, Reagan also hinted at the US Navy's ability to track and destroy Soviet SLBM forces, a capability that was arguably destabilizing, because it would threaten the survivability of an assured second strike at sea. US negotiators did not emphasize this factor in Washington's public arms control position.[49]

Stability language was initially absent from the administration's public presentation of its nuclear policy. Reagan did not use it when he proposed START with the Soviet Union in November 1981.[50] The language became more prominent, however, as the administration came under pressure from domestic and international critics. These critics charged that the Reagan administration was undermining strategic stability by refusing to submit SALT II for the advice and consent of the Senate, by making insufficient headway toward new arms control agreements with the Soviet Union, and by pursuing a nuclear modernization program that would increase the first-strike potential of US forces. US policy and rhetoric added fuel to the US nuclear freeze and European antinuclear campaigns, congressional support for a freeze in new systems, and opposition to US modernization plans.[51]

By the spring of 1982, some Reagan officials understood that the administration needed to change its tone on nuclear modernization and arms control to regain the diplomatic and public initiative.[52] The State Department emphasized the need for a proposal that would increase "the credibility of US arms control policy" while "strengthening the President's position" with European allies and globally, "in view of the political challenges of the freeze movement in the US and the peace movement in Europe."[53] As Secretary of State Alexander Haig told Reagan in April 1982: "We need a dramatic [arms control] proposal to reverse the momentum of the peace movement and put you on the side of the Angels."[54] Any arms control proposal, Haig argued, would also be necessary "to ensure congressional approval of our defense budget, and maintain support for the firm foreign policy line we have taken with the Soviet Union across the board." To gain such domestic political and international support, the United States needed a proposal that "the public [would] find comprehensible, fair, and reasonable."[55]

After much interagency wrangling, Reagan unveiled this new proposal on May 9, 1982, when he addressed the commencement ceremony at his alma mater, Eureka College in Illinois. Framing the new US position as a hardheaded response to Soviet strategic advances, facilitated by the Soviet approach to the SALT negotiations of the 1970s, Reagan nevertheless adopted a more conciliatory tone, claiming that he did "not doubt that . . . the Soviet leaders have an overriding interest in preventing the use of nuclear weapons." The new US position aimed to reduce the threat of such use by "enhanc[ing] deterrence and achiev[ing] stability through significant reductions in the most destabilizing nuclear systems, ballistic missiles, and especially the giant intercontinental ballistic missiles," including "the number of warheads they carry and their overall destructive potential."[56]

Reagan proposed specific measures, including an initial reduction in US and Soviet ballistic missile warheads by "at least a third" to "equal levels," with only half of those warheads placed on ICBMs. During a "second phase," Reagan highlighted that ballistic missile throw weight would be reduced to equality, along with other systems.[57] This second phase, as internal documents made clear, would also include "discussion of . . . constraints" on "slow-flying, clearly second-strike systems," including bombers and cruise missiles, though exactly how such systems would be constrained, beyond a proposed 250-bomber limit, was not fully spelled out.[58] The overall objective of such ICBM-focused measures, Reagan emphasized publicly, would be the "reshaping [of] our strategic forces to enhance strategic stability"

49 Long and Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike," 46–51.

50 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to Members of the National Press Club on Arms Reduction and Nuclear Weapons," November 18, 1981, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/247187.

51 Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons that Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Cornell University Press, 2022), 115–94; Freeman, "Ronald Reagan and the Nuclear Freeze Movement," 146–49; Eames, *A Voice in Their Own Destiny,* 23–33, 65–91, 110–30; Freeman, *Dreams for a Decade,* 43–78; Henry Richard Maar III, *Freeze! The Grassroots Movement to Halt the Arms Race and End the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

52 Edward C. Keefer, *Caspar Weinberger and the US Military Buildup, 1981–1985* (Historical Office, US Secretary of Defense, 2023), 155–56.

53 "Tab A3: Paper Prepared in the Department of State," undated, *FRUS* XI, 21–22.

54 "Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting," 34.

55 "Memorandum from Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan," May 1, 1982, *FRUS* XI, 36–37; Freeman, "Ronald Reagan and the Nuclear Freeze Movement," 150–51.

56 Ronald Reagan, "Address at Commencement Exercises at Eureka College in Illinois," May 9, 1982, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-commencement-exercises-eureka-college-illinois.

57 Reagan, "Address at Commencement Exercises at Eureka College in Illinois."

58 "National Security Decision Directive 33," May 14, 1982, *FRUS* XI, 63–65.

by "removing the instabilities that now exist and by dismantling the nuclear menace."[59]

The Reagan administration also embraced stability rhetoric to defend its nuclear modernization program, beginning with the MX ICBM. Capable of carrying up to twelve high-accuracy MIRVs, the MX had significant counterforce potential, but its deployment in a survivable basing mode was supposed to make it more stabilizing than Soviet MIRVed ICBMs. Washington had struggled, however, to find a basing concept that could combine high survivability with domestic-political acceptability. The Carter administration's plan to protect the MX from Soviet attack by shuttling the missiles between 4,600 shelters spread over vast tracts of Nevada and Utah was unpopular in those areas because of its impact on the environment and local communities, and arms control advocates argued that hiding the missiles in such a way would complicate the verification of future arms control agreements.[60] Reagan rejected the Carter administration's scheme, but Congress also refused the new administration's alternative "dense pack" mode, in part due to effective lobbying by the freeze campaign.[61] In December 1982, the House of Representatives delivered a significant blow to the future of MX by voting to cut production appropriations.[62] A House-Senate conference committee confirmed the House's decision and made significant research and development funding contingent on a viable solution to the basing problem.[63]

In January 1983, the Reagan administration established the President's Commission on Strategic Forces, chaired by former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, with the aim of finding a politically acceptable future for the MX. The Scowcroft Commission's April 1983 report concluded that a combination of one hundred MX missiles, a new mobile single-warhead ICBM, later dubbed "Midgetman," and effective arms reductions was the best way to promote strategic stability. The commission argued that the deployment of MX missiles would be stabilizing because it would ensure that the United States could match Soviet counterforce capabilities in the short term, thereby dissuading Moscow from believing that it could start a war without fear of "a fully effective [US] response." Deployment of a smaller mobile ICBM in the medium term would also be stabilizing, according to the commission, because it would increase survivability through mobility. The combination of the counterforce potential of the MX and the survivable small ICBM, the commission posited, would also incentivize Moscow to engage in talks that could shift the focus of Soviet forces away from a destabilizing high concentration of warheads on heavy ICBMs.[64] In folding strategic force modernization into the broader objective of stabilizing arms control, the Reagan administration was able to build a congressional coalition sufficient to endorse a reduced version of the commission's proposed package in exchange for mostly cosmetic changes to the US START position—a crucial victory against the nuclear freeze movement.[65] Using stability language, Reagan publicly endorsed the commission's objective of achieving "stable deterrence" with its modernization proposal and "nuclear stability at the lowest possible levels" through arms control.[66]

Reagan's stability rhetoric reached the peak of its ambition in his advocacy for a new space-based missile defense system, which later became known as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

Building on the Scowcroft Commission and previous administrations' arguments, the Reagan administration also presented other new systems in terms of their stabilizing characteristics, while also downplaying their destabilizing counterforce potential. Enhancements to the US bomber force, such as the deployment of ALCMs as well as the fielding of newly

59 Ronald Reagan, "Address at Commencement Exercises at Eureka College in Illinois."

60 Molly Ivins, "Utah and Nevada Worry over Missile Plan's Scale," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1979; Drew Middleton, "Reagan's First Major Task Will Be to Decide Future of MX Missile," *The New York Times*, January 19, 1981, 22.

61 Bartholomew Sparrow, *The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* (Public Affairs, 2015), 220–22; Freeman, "Ronald Reagan and the Nuclear Freeze Movement," 152–53.

62 Richard Halloran, "House, 245–176, Votes Down 988 Million for MX Missile; Setback for Reagan Policy," *The New York Times*, December 8, 1982, A1, D23.

63 Freeman, "Ronald Reagan and the Nuclear Freeze Movement," 153.

64 *Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces*, April 6, 1983, 6, 11, 15–16, 22–25.

65 Sparrow, The Strategist, 238; Eames, *A Voice in Their Own Destiny*, 124.

66 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks Endorsing the Recommendations in the Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces," April 19, 1983, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262648.

capable platforms such as the B-1 and the new "Stealth Bomber," were stabilizing, the administration argued, because they would help the bomber force "achieve greater survivability and penetration of Soviet air defenses," thereby assuring US retaliation. Similarly, the longer-range Trident II D-5 missile would "permit greater use of wide-ocean areas," which would make US submarines harder for Soviet antisubmarine forces to target and ensure their "long-term survivability." As internal administration memoranda argued: "All of these changes [were] designed to promote [the] long-term stability of [US] strategic forces."[67]

When the administration mentioned US counterforce capabilities, they were presented as stabilizing. Echoing the Scowcroft Commission's argument on the stabilizing qualities of MX's hard-target-kill capabilities, the administration argued that Trident II D-5 would also "encourage . . . Soviet movement from large silo-based ICBMs toward smaller mobile ICBMs" by making fixed silo-based ICBMs untenably vulnerable. In encouraging this effort to "channel residual deterrent capability into move survivable, and thus, more stable systems" such as mobile ICBMs, bomber weapons, and SLBMs, the administration's START position and modernization program would support each other.[68] Thus, the administration wove its modernization and arms control positions into one single coherent agenda, framed around its selective application of stabilizing criteria.

Reagan's stability rhetoric reached the peak of its ambition in his advocacy for a new space-based missile defense system, which later became known as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Mainstream arms control theorists argued that such defenses were highly destabilizing. A missile defense system would increase first-strike incentives, according to these theorists, because it would provide the attacking side with some measure of protection against the ragged retaliation from an attacked state after a counterforce first strike.[69] Yet in the March 23, 1983, address in which he announced SDI, Reagan contrasted two different versions of stability: the existing "stability through offensive threat"—that is, based on mutual vulnerability to assured retaliation—and "a truly lasting stability" based on defensive systems that could pave the way for "eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles."[70] The stabilizing qualities of strategic defense and the importance of maintaining US freedom of action in space became key elements of the United States' arms control and modernization programs.[71]

Motivated and shaped by the controversy over the administration's stance on arms control and nuclear modernization, by the end of Reagan's first term the key elements of its new definition of strategic stability were in place. This definition focused almost exclusively on the destabilizing characteristics of Soviet forces, principally its high throw-weight, silo-based, MIRVed ICBMs, which could only threaten the relatively small and shrinking portion of US warheads placed on Minuteman ICBMs, while downplaying the more significant first-strike capabilities of new US weapons. The administration argued that improvements to US forces would facilitate, rather than undermine, strategic stability through arms control by increasing their survivability and incentivizing the Soviet Union to move away from a force posture based on high concentrations of warheads on vulnerable heavy missiles. Finally, the administration rejected stability through mutual vulnerability, arguing that new defenses would eventually pave the way for stability based on defensive weapons.

While the specific modalities of the US position changed over the next seven years, this basic concept remained intact. This definition was a very different vision of strategic stability to the traditional Schelling-Halperin conception, which emphasized the importance of securing mutual vulnerability, including through mutual restraint in counterforce-capable weaponry and the limitation of missile defenses. This new formulation also clashed with the evolving Soviet conception of strategic stability.

The Soviet Conception of Strategic Stability

The Soviet Union did not frame its nuclear posture or arms control policy in terms of strategic stability during the SALT or early START negotiations, but from the late 1960s onwards several Soviet military-technical insights and concerns laid the groundwork for the stability thinking of the mid-1980s.

The first development was the Soviet conclusion that a national missile defense against strategic attack was technically impossible. By October 1967, a scientific committee of the Military Industrial Commission had decided that the Soviet *Avrora* project, designed to develop a national missile defense, was infeasible and

67 "Paper Prepared in the National Security Council," undated, *FRUS* XI, 278–79.

68 "Paper Prepared in the National Security Council," undated, *FRUS* XI, 278–79.

69 Thomas C. Schelling, "What Went Wrong with Arms Control?" *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 2 (Winter 1985): 221–22; Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 475–76.

70 Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security," March 23, 1983, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262125.

71 Aaron Bateman, *Weapons in Space: Technology, Politics, and the Rise and Fall of the Strategic Defense Initiative* (MIT Press, 2024), 133–34, 143–44.

discontinued the project. Likewise, after the first round of the SALT I negotiations with the United States in November 1969, Moscow decided that there was no current prospect of developing a successful large-scale missile defense system. Thus, by the early stages of SALT I, the Soviet Union had decided that missile defenses were infeasible and that, under these circumstances, it was better to reach an agreement with the United States that would constrain their deployment. The 1972 ABM Treaty was such an agreement.[72]

Second, the Soviet Union became preoccupied with the vulnerability of its strategic forces to a US first strike. Even as the USSR was drawing level with the US in the number of intercontinental launchers in the late 1960s, researchers in the Ministry of Defense's Fourth Central Research Institute (4 TsNII) and the Ministry of General Machinebuilding's Central Scientific Research Institute for Machinebuilding (TsNIIMash) became concerned with the growing vulnerability of the Soviet ICBM force to a US strike with MIRVed missiles and argued that the next generation of missiles should be emplaced in reinforced silos to enable them to survive such an attack. As the head of TsNIIMash, Yuri Mozzhorin, later recounted, he put the case to Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev that "only the doctrine of a guaranteed retaliatory strike would deter aggression and ensure stability and peace." This argument eventually prevailed, and led to the significant hardening of silos for Soviet third-generation missiles as they were deployed from 1974.[73]

Further advances in US counterforce technologies during the 1970s increased Soviet anxieties that silo hardening would not be enough. US deployment of the counterforce-capable Mk 12-A nuclear warhead on its Minuteman ICBMs, along with the development of cruise missiles, meant that by the late 1970s Soviet policymakers were fearful that they would lapse back into nuclear inferiority to the United States. The Soviet leadership became concerned that the United States was developing its nuclear forces in such a way to enable it to win a nuclear war or coerce Moscow into submission during a crisis.[74]

Yet despite significant concerns among some Soviet strategists regarding the vulnerability of Soviet ICBMs and the implications for stability dating back more than a decade, a combination of bureaucratic inertia and technological limitations meant that by the early 1980s, the backbone of the Soviet deterrent remained vulnerable MIRVed heavy land-based ICBMs.[75] Contrary to US estimates that estimated that as many as 650 Soviet ICBMs would be able to ride out a US first strike, by 1979 the hardening of Soviet silos had only progressed to the point that 300 ICBMs would survive such an attack. That number would likely decrease with the deployment of more counterforce-capable US missiles, such as Trident II, cruise missiles, and the MX.[76] According to one memoirist, "The number of missile silos was so small compared to the number of warheads the United States could launch in one salvo that almost all [of the] Soviet strategic arsenal could be eliminated in a hypothetical American first strike."[77] This state of affairs led to a renewed Soviet push for ICBMs in a more survivable basing mode, principally the Topol (SS-25) mobile ICBM.[78]

The initial Soviet START position reflected this preoccupation with the counterforce capabilities of new US systems, and the concomitant needs to both preserve the survivability of existing silo-based heavy missile force and secure the deployment of future mobile ICBMs. At the opening round of START in the summer of 1982, the Soviets proposed a freeze on the buildup of all strategic systems, including the prohibition of all long-range (above 600 kilometers) cruise and air-launched ballistic missiles, as well as the limitation of new US and Soviet nuclear missile submarines (SSBNs), named Ohio and Typhoon respectively, to between four and six boats each. The Soviet side also put forward a total cap on all strategic nuclear delivery vehicles (SNDVs)—including heavy bombers—of 1,800, with a sublimit of 1,120 MIRVed SNDVs. The aim of this proposal, according to Soviet memoirists, was to "provide a high level of survivability for the Soviet strategic forces" by limiting US MIRVed SNDVs, while also protecting Soviet mobile and silo-based ICBMs from cuts.[79] Limits on strategic cruise missiles were also clearly designed to close off this emerging area of US advantage.

Soviet use of stability language, however, was initially quite limited and focused primarily on pushing

72 David Holloway, "Racing Toward Armageddon? Soviet Views of Strategic Nuclear War, 1955–1972," in Michael D. Gordin and G. John Ikenberry, eds., *The Age of Hiroshima* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 82–87.

73 Holloway, "Racing Toward Armageddon?" 80–82; Green and Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There," 623–24.

74 Vladimir Dvorkin and Aleksei Produkin, *Povest' o 4 TsNII MO i iadernom sderzhivanii* [The Story of the 4th Central Research Institute of the Ministry of Defense and Nuclear Deterrence] (Korelyov: Izdatel'stvo PSTM, 2009), 50; Green and Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There," 606–41.

75 Dvorkin and Produkin, *Povest' o 4 TsNII*, 15–20, 25, 49–50; Nikolai Sokov, *Russian Strategic Modernization: The Past and Future* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 21–42; Green and Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There," 639.

76 Podvig, "The Window of Vulnerability that Wasn't," 129–32.

77 Sokov, *Russian Strategic Modernization*, 21.

78 Dvorkin and Produkin, *Povest' o 4 TsNII*, 20–21, 50; Sokov, *Russian Strategic Modernization*, 38; Green and Long, "The MAD Who Wasn't There," 637.

79 Aleksandr' G. Savel'yev and Nikolay N. Detinov, *The Big Five: Arms Control Decision-Making in the Soviet Union* (Praeger, 1995), 72–74.

back against the US arms control position, rather than characterizing Moscow's own arms control objectives. In a letter responding to Reagan's Eureka speech in May 1982, General Secretary Brezhnev criticized the US ICBM-focused approach as "one-sided" and "a breach of that very stability which the US side is allegedly so anxious to ensure," while warning in a public speech that neither side should modernize its weaponry in ways that would undermine "the stability of the strategic situation."[80] The Soviet side, while occasionally referring to strategic stability during the initial rounds of talks, did not generally frame its arms control positions in those terms. Instead, Moscow preferred to use the old Soviet slogans of "equality and equal security" to describe its overarching approach in the period prior to the Soviet walkout from strategic arms talks in December 1983.[81]

The Soviet Union did, however, begin to use strategic stability more actively in 1983 as part of its broader anti-SDI propaganda campaign.[82] Reacting to the TV address in which Reagan announced the project, new Soviet General Secretary Yuriy Andropov criticized US missile defense plans as leading toward "the acquisition of a first-strike potential" by the United States because it would "deprive [the other side] of the ability to deliver a retaliatory strike."[83] On April 10, 1983, the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* published an open letter from a group of Soviet scientists that criticized Reagan's scheme for being "oriented toward the open destabilization of the existing strategic balance" on approximately the same grounds.[84] In a private March 1984 letter to Reagan, the new Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko declared that "large-scale ABM systems would be in direct contradiction with the objectives [*sic*] of strengthening strategic stability."[85] After his accession to the Soviet General Secretaryship in March 1985, Gorbachev continued to criticize SDI as destabilizing.[86]

The two sides' differing conceptions of stability were on full display at the opening round of the new Nuclear and Space Talks, which began in March 1985.

In January 1985, in a step forward in the use of strategic stability as a contested concept in strategic arms talks, the two sides agreed to include the term in the Soviet-US joint statement on the resumption of arms control negotiations. The statement specifically mentioned that the new Nuclear and Space Talks (NST) would proceed with the "objective" of "strengthening strategic stability."[87] Although this statement was not the first time that the Soviet side had agreed to such language in a joint declaration, it marked a new trend in Moscow's public use of the term to fortify its own arms control objectives.[88] In his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly as Soviet Foreign Minister in September 1985, Eduard Shevardnadze presented the Soviet strategic arms control position as "enhancing strategic stability." Shevardnadze condemned the Reagan administration's nuclear buildup and SDI as threats to the current "strategic equilibrium"—a trend that, he claimed, Soviet arms control policy was designed to reverse.[89]

80 "Tab A: Letter From Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev to President Reagan," May 20, 1982, in James Graham Wilson, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume III: Soviet Union, January 1981–January 1983* (US Government Printing Office, 2016), 551; "Zabota ob interesakh naroda—delo chesti komsomola: Rech' tovarisha L. I. Brezhnev na XIX s'ezde VLKSM," [Care for the People's Interests Is a Matter of Honor for the Komsomol: Comrade L. I. Brezhnev's Speech at the Nineteenth Congress of the All-Union Leninist Communist Youth Union], *Pravda*, May 19, 1982, 1–2.

81 "Paper Prepared in the Soviet Foreign Ministry," undated, *FRUS* XI, 91–92; "Telegram from the Mission in Geneva to the Department of State," August 13, 1982, FRUS XI, 105–6; Savel'yev and Detinov, *The Big Five*, 73–74; "Zabota ob interesakh naroda," 1–2; John A. Callcott, "The Soviet Union Broke Off Strategic Arms Talks Today," UPI, December 8, 1983, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1983/12/08/The-Soviet-Union-broke-off-strategic-arms-talks-today/1901439707600/.

82 Bateman, *Weapons in Space*, 90–92.

83 "Otvety Iu. V. Andropova na voprosy korrespondenta 'Pravdy,'" [Iu V. Andropov's Answers to the Pravda Correspondent's Questions], *Pravda*, March 27, 1983, 1.

84 "Obrashchenie k vsem uchenym mira," [Appeal to All the World's Scientists], Pravda, April 10, 1983, 4.

85 "Letter from Soviet General Secretary Chernenko to President Reagan," March 19, 1984, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988 Vol IV: Soviet Union, January 1983–March 1985* (Government Printing Office, 2021), 1364, National Security Archive, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29083-03-us-department-state-foreign-relations-united-states-1981-1988-volume-iv-soviet.

86 "Letter from Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev to President Reagan," June 10, 1985, Elizabeth C. Charles, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union March 1985–October 1986* (Government Printing Office, 2020), 147–48.

87 "Memorandum of Conversation," January 8, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 363.

88 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms," June 18, 1979, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/united-states-soviet-union-treaty-the-limitation-strategic-offensive-arms-and-related; US-Soviet Joint Statement, September 23, 1981, *FRUS* III, 279.

89 "Excerpts from UN Speeches by Shultz and Shevardnadze," *The New York Times*, September 15, 1985, A8.

By the early Gorbachev period, therefore, the Soviet Union had framed its arms control proposals in terms of preserving strategic stability through mutual vulnerability, and centered these proposals on the preservation of this mutual vulnerability through limitations on missile defenses and halting the qualitative modernization of US offensive forces.

The two sides' differing conceptions of stability were on full display at the opening round of the new Nuclear and Space Talks, which began in March 1985. The key elements of these differing positions as they related to strategic stability are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Key elements of the US and Soviet conceptions of strategic stability at the Nuclear and Space Talks, 1985

Issue	Initial US position	Initial Soviet position
Offense–defense/space linkage	Two areas should not be linked; new restrictions on missile defense/space weapons not required	Two areas should be linked; new restrictions in missile defense/space weapons required
Heavy intercontinental ballistic missiles	Should be restricted more severely than other systems	Should not be restricted more severely than other systems
Sea-launched cruise missiles	Should not be limited	Those with a range of over 600 km should be banned
Air-launched cruise missiles	Should be permitted	Those with a range of over 600 km should be banned
Mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles	Should be banned	Should be permitted

The Nuclear and Space Talks

The general trend of START from 1985 onwards became the slow Soviet walk back on almost all of these issues, which resulted in a START I agreement that was far closer to Washington's original conception of strategic stability than Moscow's. Taking each issue from table 1 in turn, this section will explain the evolution of this trend from 1985 to START's conclusion in 1991.

Offense–Defense/Space Linkage

The Soviet retreat was clearest on the question of whether there should be explicit linkage between an agreement that limited strategic offensive nuclear arms and one on space weapons, including the United States' proposed SDI missile defense system. The Soviet Union, focused on preserving mutual vulnerability, initially insisted that progress on offensive arms negotiations would be contingent on progress toward new restrictions on space weapons, including SDI.[90] The first weakening of the Soviet insistence on this linkage came in September 1985 when it presented a substantive proposal for offensive reductions without any US commitment to new constraints on strategic defenses. While maintaining that any offensive agreement was "contingent upon a ban on space weapons," Moscow had signaled that it was willing to move offensive negotiations forward without US agreement on defensive limitations in principle.[91] In November 1985, Gorbachev went further, agreeing to the basic US target of a 50 percent reduction in strategic offensive arms without any significant movement from the US side on SDI, but "on the understanding that neither side would take steps which would open up an arms race in space."[92]

On May 29, 1986, the Soviet Union began to alter the substance of the restrictions on space weapons that it required in exchange for an offensive agreement. Previously, Moscow had insisted on a complete "ban on space strike arms." Now, the USSR offered a series of accords: an agreement that both sides would not exit the ABM Treaty "for a period of 15–20 years"; an accord that would "clarify ambiguities" on the implementation of the treaty regarding research and testing; and "a provision" that made clear that the United States would not "be working on offensive weapons under the SDI

90 "Paper Prepared in the National Security Council," undated, *FRUS* XI, 374–75.

91 "Letter from the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Ridgway) to Secretary of State Shultz," September 28, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 423–25; "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," November 5, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 456–60.

92 "Memorandum of Conversation," November 20, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 485.

Program."[93] These restrictions were unacceptable to Washington, but US officials recognized that the offer "hint[ed] that a 'strengthening' of the ABM treaty might replace a comprehensive ban on 'space-strike' arms as a prerequisite for substantial reductions in offensive arms."[94]

At a meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986, Gorbachev modified the Soviet position further. He cut the proposed observance period of the ABM Treaty from "15–20" years to 10, on the understanding that research on space-based elements of any system be limited to the laboratory, but tied this proposal to a 50 percent reduction on strategic arms and an agreement on the elimination of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) in Europe.[95] On the final day of that meeting, Reagan and Gorbachev appeared to agree in principle to "eliminate all nuclear weapons" as part of a package that included a ten-year ABM Treaty non-withdrawal agreement, but remained divided on the restriction of SDI to the laboratory during that period.[96] The summit broke up without a joint communique.

From April 1987, the Soviets began to discuss the possibility of a non-withdrawal pledge on the ABM Treaty combined with an agreed "list of devices not to be put into space and thresholds for associated critical parameters." Alternatively, the Soviet Union proposed that the two sides "agree to 'strictly abide' by the ABM Treaty as it was signed and ratified in 1972" and any disagreements over certain activities would be worked out in the Special Control Commission (SCC). As the US understood, this proposal represented a further Soviet concession because it "acknowledged that not all research and experimental work on space-based ABM systems must be restricted to laboratories on earth."[97] The United States responded with an alternative of their own, under which the Soviets would be assured some "predictability" regarding the progress of the US SDI program during a "non-deployment period" through "briefings," data exchanges, "observation" of certain tests, and on-site "visits to strategic defense installations." Specific activities, including testing, however, would not be prohibited.[98]

Finally, in September 1989 Gorbachev wrote to the new US president, George H. W. Bush, calling for the US and USSR to "set aside, for the time being, our conceptual argument about whether the placing of weapons in space . . . will strengthen strategic stability or have the opposite effect." Delivering Gorbachev's letter, Shevardnadze explicitly stated that the Soviet Union would not make a START treaty contingent on a new agreement on space weapons. In return, Shevardnadze proposed that the two sides negotiate on permitted SDI activities under the ABM Treaty, which the Americans refused.[99] The Soviet Union did not receive any concrete assurances regarding future US compliance with the ABM Treaty in return for conclusion of the START I treaty on offensive forces. Moscow expressed its dissatisfaction through a unilateral statement that it could consider US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty as grounds for abrogation of START I.[100]

Heavy Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles

Another issue on which the Soviet Union moved significantly was whether heavy MIRVed ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) were particularly destabilizing and therefore should be subject to special reductions and restrictions. In keeping with its desire to protect the backbone of its strategic forces, the Soviet Union initially rejected any attempts to single out its SS-18 heavy ICBMs for drastic cuts. Soviet negotiators argued that MX, Trident, and cruise missile programs were just as destabilizing as the SS-18, given their counterforce potential.[101] The United States had "discovered a new concept of stability, namely, Soviet heavy missiles," according to a Soviet general—a discovery that was designed to undercut the existing "parity in missiles" which the Soviet Union had achieved.[102]

The initial Soviet position in the fall of 1985 proposed drastic cuts in the overall number of strategic offensive systems but did not commit the Soviet Union to deep reductions in any specific system. This approach would allow the USSR to retain its 308

93 "Memorandum from the Head of the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva (Kampelman) to Secretary of State Shultz," May 23, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 529.

94 "Telegram from the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva to the Department of State," June 6, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 532.

95 "Editorial Note," *FRUS* XI, 668.

96 "Memorandum of Conversation," October 12, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 731–36.

97 "Memorandum of Conversation," April 15, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 858; "Paper Prepared by the Arms Control Support Group," November 19, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 964.

98 "National Security Decision Directive 290," December 7, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 1073.

99 Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1993), 117–19; Bateman, *Weapons in Space*, 180–181.

100 "Statement by the Soviet Side at the US-Soviet Negotiations on Nuclear and Space Arms Concerning the Interrelationship Between Reductions in Strategic Offensive Arms and Compliance with the Treaty between the US and USSR on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems," Federation of American Scientists, https://nuke.fas.org/control/start1/text/declsts.htm#45.

101 "Telegram from the Delegation to the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks in Geneva to the White House," February 7, 1983, *FRUS* XI, 202–3.

102 "Memorandum of Conversation," August 11, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 576–77.

SS-18s while compensating through bigger cuts to other weapons. The Soviet side also proposed that no single component of each side's forces could exceed 60 percent of the warhead total, which effectively meant a higher sublimit on ICBM warheads at 3,600 compared to the US offer of 3,000. Under the Soviet proposal, the counterforce potential of both sides would be constrained by a ban or strict limits on "new types of ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers," a position that the US rejected as too restrictive on its own modernization program.[103]

A key breakthrough came at the Reykjavik summit of October 1986, when Gorbachev agreed to cut Soviet SS-18s by 50 percent, from 308 to 154.

By contrast, the US sought to constrain SS-18 and other highly MIRVed Soviet land-based missiles through a series of warhead sublimits and throw-weight restrictions. In September 1986, the United States had two sublimit options before the USSR. One outlined a 50 percent cut in strategic offensive forces with a 1,600 cap on strategic delivery vehicles and 6,000 total warheads, a 4,500 sublimit on ballistic missile warheads, 3,000 on ICBM warheads, and 1,500 on silo-based ICBMs other than those with six or fewer warheads. Alternatively, the US proposed "less sweeping" cuts in strategic offensive forces, with a 1,600 cap on strategic nuclear delivery vehicles and 7,500 warheads, combined with sublimits of 5,500 on ballistic missile warheads and 3,300 on ICBM warheads, with a further sublimit of 1,650 on silo-based ICBMs other than those with six or fewer warheads.[104] These measures were combined with a standing US demand for a 50 percent cut in the total Soviet ballistic missile throw weight. This latter measure would only apply to the Soviet Union, because US forces were "already below this [throw-weight] level."[105]

The Soviet Union initially rejected the US proposals. Such a system of sublimits, an internal Soviet analysis concluded, "would mean . . . a complete and expensive destruction of the structure of our strategic forces, while not impacting the American structure in any way."[106] US officials privately concurred with the Soviet characterization. "We are nice guys, Mr. President," Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe told Reagan, "but . . . We want to affect their force structure."[107]

103 "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," November 5, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 457–60.

104 "Paper Prepared in the National Security Council," undated, *FRUS* XI, 657–58.

105 "Paper Prepared by the Department of State," undated, *FRUS* XI, 876.

106 "Thoughts for the Meeting with R. Reagan," Box 4, Folder 11, trans. Natasha Porfirenko, Vitaly Kataev Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.

107 "Minutes of a National Security Planning Group Meeting," October 14, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 917.

A key breakthrough came at the Reykjavik summit of October 1986, when Gorbachev agreed to cut Soviet SS-18s by 50 percent, from 308 to 154.[108] Soviet follow-up proposals also offered that new types of weapons and qualitative improvements to current strategic systems would only be prohibited from January 1992. This offer would allow the introduction of weapons that had previously been constrained under Soviet proposals, including Trident II and the B-2 stealth bomber. The Soviets also agreed to a cap of 1,600 strategic delivery vehicles and an overall limit of 6,000 warheads. The Soviets rejected the US warhead sublimits, however, arguing that the two sides should have freedom to structure their strategic forces between ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers.[109]

After the Reykjavik meeting, the United States modified its 50 percent cut proposal by increasing some of its proposed warhead sublimits, from 4,500 to 4,800 for ballistic missile warheads, from 3,000 to 3,300 ICBM warheads, and from 1,500 to 1,650 warheads on ICBMs, "except silo-based light and medium ICBMs with six or fewer warheads."[110] This change moved to accommodate Soviet demands for more flexibility on ICBM warhead loading, but with an ICBM sublimit that, US officials noted privately, "would sharply constrain the Soviets, with little effect on the US." State Department officials calculated that they could ultimately live without the 3,000–3,300 ICBM warhead sublimit, as long it was replaced with a warhead sublimit of 1,540 on heavy ICBMs—which equated to 10 warheads per SS-18. For Washington, officials argued, the key sublimit numbers were 6,000 total warheads, 1,540 heavy ICBM warheads, and 4,800 ballistic missile warheads.[111]

In late 1987, the Soviet Union moved a significant distance toward meeting US limits. After proposing various alternative warhead sublimits throughout the fall designed to restrict US SLBM warhead levels, Moscow also moved almost all the way to the proposed US ballistic missile warhead sublimit of 4,800 at the December 1987 Washington Summit. On a visit to Washington prior to the summit, Chief of the Soviet General Staff Marshal Sergey Akhromeev confirmed that the USSR would accept a 1,540 heavy ICBM warhead sublimit.[112] In the final declaration that emerged from the Washington Summit, the Soviets agreed to a 4,900 ballistic missile warhead limit—just 100 warheads above the US-proposed number.[113] While the two sides continued to haggle over separate ICBM and SLBM warhead caps, Washington had achieved most of its priorities with the 1,540 heavy ICBM warhead and 4,900 ballistic missile warhead sublimits. In the final treaty, "new type[s]" of heavy ICBMs were also banned and the throw weight of current types could not be increased.[114] These caps cut Soviet heavy ICBMs by 50 percent and limited its land-based ballistic missile forces significantly, while leaving the US with sufficient flexibility to increase the number of warheads allocated to its more secure but increasingly counterforce-capable SLBM forces.

Sea-Launched Cruise Missiles

The Soviet Union was slightly more successful in including sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) in START I, but only to a limited extent. The United States initially refused to entertain SLCM limits on the grounds that cruise missiles presented unique verification problems. Washington argued that SLCMs were central to the US Navy's modernization plans and that differentiating between nuclear and nonnuclear SLCMs was impossible. This combination meant that SLCMs could not be included in an agreement. The USSR's basic objective was to limit SLCMs as much as possible to prevent the United States from constructing a highly accurate striking force (which would enjoy a short warning time due to their low flight profile) outside of the treaty's limits. Moscow initially argued that the verification problem would be solved if SLCMs of a range of over 600 kilometers were banned entirely.[115]

In June 1986, however, the Soviet Union brought forth a new proposal that included limits on SLCMs by restricting deployment to specific types of submarines only. In this way, the Soviets argued, both SLCM carriers and SLCM warheads could be included in the treaty.[116] Between September and November of 1986,

108 "Memorandum of Conversation," October 12, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 728.

109 "Telegram from the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva to the Department of State," *FRUS* XI, 769, 772.

110 "Telegram from the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva to the Department of State," November 12, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 764.

111 "Paper Prepared by the Department of State," *FRUS* XI, 874–76.

112 "Memorandum from the Special Assistant to the Deputy Secretary of State (Timbie) to Secretary of State Shultz," November 27, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 1013–14.

113 "Telegram from the Department of State to All Diplomatic and Consular Posts," December 11, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 1141.

114 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms [START I]," July 31, 1991, https://www.acq.osd.mil/asda/ssipm/sdc/tc/start1/START1text.html.

115 "Telegram from the Delegation to the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks in Geneva to the White House," February 7, 1983, *FRUS* XI, 203; "Memorandum of Conversation," July 31, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 419–20; "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," November 5, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 459.

116 "Electronic Message from Robert Linhard of the National Security Council Staff to Steven Steiner, Ronald Sable, Rodney McDaniel, and Robert Pearson of the National Security Council Staff," June 11, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 535–36.

Moscow conceded that SLCMs could be accounted for separately from the main aggregate START limits. Moscow continued to insist, however, that difficulties in differentiating nuclear-armed from conventionally armed SLCMs would mean limits on both.[117] The Soviets proposed, therefore, that long-range SLCM deployment be capped at 400 per side and limited to two types of submarines, thereby banning them from surface vessels, and that SLCM numbers be counted at the maximum loading of each submarine.[118]

All of these proposals flew in the face of US plans for large numbers of conventional SLCMs on approximately 100 submarines and 90 ships. The most Washington would offer was a unilateral statement of long-range SLCM deployment plans, but with the proviso that the United States would retain "the right to change [its] plans as necessary," a solution that the Soviet Union rejected.[119] Placing the SLCM issue in the context of already agreed-upon restrictions on Soviet heavy ICBMs while protecting the US ability to deploy "cruise missiles *en masse*," Akhromeev accused Washington of attempting to use "legal instruments to achieve military superiority over the USSR."[120] At the December 1987 Washington Summit, Gorbachev threatened: "If [SLCMs] are not taken care of there won't be a treaty."[121]

In the face of this impasse, US negotiators decided to "hang tough" on SLCMs.[122] Ultimately, the United States believed that "SLCM is too valuable to trade away, especially if our conventional capability is capped."[123] Even on nuclear-armed SLCMs, the United States wanted significantly more flexibility. While the Soviet side was willing to accept a combined cap of 1,000 nuclear and nonnuclear SLCMs, US officials rejected any limits on conventional SLCMs and privately discussed a figure of 1,500 nuclear-only SLCMs for a unilateral declaration.[124] According to Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci, the Soviets could not "cut it from the standpoint of technology" and that was "why they [were] going after the SLCM."[125] The inability of either side to concede on this point was one of the key issues that deferred the conclusion of START I to the Bush administration.[126]

At the same meeting in September 1989 in which the Soviet side agreed to delink negotiations on space and offensive forces, Shevardnadze also agreed that SLCMs could be removed from the START limits.[127] The Soviet Foreign Minister proposed that the two sides deal with SLCMs in separate talks, but the United States remained adamant that SLCMs should not be limited. The two sides eventually compromised on an exchange of declarations that pledged to provide data on the "maximum number of deployed nuclear sea-launched cruise missiles for each of the following five years that the treaty is in force," with both pledging that the number of deployed weapons would not exceed 880. Only nuclear-armed SLCMs of more than a 600-km range would count against this total; nuclear SLCMs would not count against the START I limits; and no verification measures were attached to this provision.[128] The United States unilaterally withdrew nuclear SLCMs from day-to-day service under the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of September 1991, two months after it signed START I.[129]

Air-Launched Cruise Missiles

The Soviet Union also moved a long way to accommodate the United States' position on air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs). At the beginning of the Nuclear and Space Talks, the United States proposed that it would be able to limit its ALCM deployment in exchange for significant reductions in the Soviet

117 "Telegram from the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva to the Department of State," November 12, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 766.

118 "Paper Prepared by the Department of State," undated, *FRUS* XI, 877; "Telegram from the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva to the Department of State," November 12, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 770.

119 "Memorandum of Conversation," May 20, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1377; "Memorandum of Conversation," May 30, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1434.

120 "Memorandum of Conversation," May 30, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1436.

121 "Memorandum of Conversation," undated, *FRUS* XI, 1077.

122 "Summary of a Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting," *FRUS* XI, 1169; "Memorandum of Conversation," March 23, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1267–70.

123 "Memorandum of Conversation," May 20, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1378.

124 "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Powell) to President Reagan," May 20, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1383; "Memorandum of Conversation," May 30, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1424; "Memorandum of Conversation," September 22, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1515.

125 "Minutes of a Meeting," August 11, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1480.

126 "Telegram from the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva to the Department of State," July 11, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1452.

127 Beschloss and Talbott, *At the Highest Levels*, 119.

128 "Declaration of the United States of America Regarding Its Policy Concerning Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missiles," July 31, 1991, Federation of American Scientists, https://nuke.fas.org/control/start1/text/declsts.htm#48; "Declaration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Regarding Its Policy Concerning Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missiles," July 31, 1991, Federation of American Scientists, https://nuke.fas.org/control/start1/text/declsts.htm#49.

129 George H. W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on Reducing United States and Soviet Nuclear Weapons," September 27, 1991, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-reducing-united-states-and-soviet-nuclear-weapons.

ballistic missile warheads.[130] Washington indicated its willingness to limit its ALCM force to 1,500 as part of an overall package that would include significant reductions in Soviet ballistic missile throw weight.[131] The Soviets wanted to restrict ALCMs as much as possible, and initially proposed that all ALCMs with a range of over 600 kilometers should be prohibited.[132]

The Soviet position moved significantly in the summer of 1986, when Moscow indicated that it would be willing to accept "a limited deployment of long-range ALCMs."[133] At the Reykjavik Summit in October of that year, the Soviet Union agreed that ALCMs could be included in the overall warhead limit of 6,000. The Soviets also agreed that non-ALCM bomber weapons, such as short-range attack missiles (SRAMs) and gravity bombs, would count as one warhead per heavy bomber, even if an aircraft carried several non-ALCM weapons. Undercounting non-ALCM bomber armament freed up space under the warhead limit for higher ALCM loadings on US heavy bombers.[134]

The way in which the treaty would count ALCMs, however, remained unresolved throughout the rest of the Reagan administration. To accurately reflect the real ALCM capacity of each heavy bomber type, the Soviet Union held that each ALCM-armed bomber should count against the warhead total based on the number of ALCM stations on a particular model of bomber. Under this rule, a cruise-missile equipped B-52 bomber had 20 weapons stations and would therefore count as 20 warheads toward the 6,000-warhead aggregate, whereas an ALCM-equipped Tu-95 Bear bomber, which had fewer weapons stations, would count as fewer warheads. Soviet negotiators claimed the Bear could carry 6 ALCMs, though US officials believed the real number to be closer to 12 to 16.[135] The United States argued that such a counting rule was unrealistic, because US heavy bombers did not routinely carry their maximum load. Instead, the United States proposed that all ALCM-equipped bombers should be counted as carrying 6 ALCMs, thereby substantially undercounting US bombers' maximum ALCM capacity.[136]

The two sides also differed on the range above which ALCMs would count against the 6,000-warhead limit. Moscow stuck with the SALT II definition of 600 kilometers, while Washington held that the greater effectiveness of current Soviet air defenses required a higher limit of 1,500 kilometers.[137] While Moscow maintained that all ALCMs above the range limit should be counted as armed with nuclear warheads to simplify verification, the United States held that long-range conventionally armed ALCMs should not be included in the treaty.[138]

The two sides remained far apart on these issues from the Reykjavik Summit in October 1986 to the end of the Reagan administration in January 1989. The United States increased its warhead attribution number for ALCM-capable bombers to 10 in March of 1988.[139] The US also conceded that all existing ALCMs that had both a nuclear and conventional capability would be counted as nuclear for the purposes of the treaty.[140] The Soviets held fast, however, and claimed that the US B-52 should count as carrying as many as 28 ALCMs and attributing 22 to the B-1B.[141]

The final arrangements left the US with significant additional capability above the formal warhead limits.

Negotiations on ALCM counting rules continued throughout the early Bush administration. The final arrangements left the US with significant additional capability above the formal warhead limits. The United States agreed on counting all nuclear ALCMs above 600 kilometers in range, but retained the 10-warhead long-range nuclear ALCM counting rule for its heavy

130 "Telegram from the Department of State to the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva," March 10, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 372.

131 "Memorandum of Conversation," undated, *FRUS* XI, 433–34.

132 "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," November 5, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 457.

133 "Memorandum of Conversation," September 5, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 614.

134 "Memorandum of Conversation," October 11–12, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 695.

135 "Telegram from the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva to the Department of State," November 12, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 768; "Memorandum of Conversation," December 9, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 1095–96; "Memorandum of Conversation," March 22, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1255; "Minutes of a Meeting," May 9, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1350; "Memorandum of Conversation," December 8, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 1084–85.

136 "Memorandum of Conversation," December 9, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 1095–96.

137 "Memorandum of Conversation," December 8, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 1085–86.

138 "Paper Prepared by the Department of State," undated, *FRUS* XI, 1119.

139 "Memorandum of Conversation," March 22, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1255.

140 "Memorandum of Conversation," May 20, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1379.

141 "Memorandum of Conversation," March 23, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1265.

bombers, up to 150 units, even though its main ALCM carrier, the B-52, could load 20 ALCMs.[142] This allowed Washington to deploy the approximately 3,000 long-range nuclear ALCMs that it had originally wanted, but only 1,500 of those warheads would count toward the aggregate limit.[143] These rules covered long-range nuclear ALCMs only. New conventional-only ALCMs would not be counted, leaving the United States with significant future flexibility in this area.

The Soviet Union secured a concession from the United States on ALCM counting rules by ensuring that each Soviet long-range ALCM-carrying heavy bomber would be attributed 8 ALCMs, up to a total of 180 bombers. These different limits recognized that Soviet heavy bombers could carry 16 rather than 20 ALCMs, and therefore Moscow would need compensation of 30 additional bombers to give it the right to draw close to parity with the United States in attributed and real ALCM deployment.[144] An internal Soviet analysis, however, noted that the United States "understood" that the Soviet Union "would never be able" to deploy ALCMs near this level. This analysis estimated that Moscow would eventually deploy approximately 1,600 ALCMs—just over half of what the US planned. This discrepancy between the counting rules and operational reality, under these calculations, was one of the main reasons why the United States would be able to deploy over 8,336 warheads—over 2,000 warheads above the officially attributed number under START I counting rules—while the Soviet Union would be able to deploy over 900 fewer, at 7,380.[145]

Mobile ICBMs

Mobile ICBMs were the only major area in which the Soviet Union was able to stay close to its original position. The United States, citing difficulties in verifying mobile ICBM numbers, originally proposed to prohibit all mobile ICBMs.[146] With such systems constituting one of the key components of Soviet attempts to protect its assured retaliatory capability by moving away from reliance on relatively vulnerable fixed ICBMs, Moscow resisted this demand.[147]

The Reagan administration's proposed mobile ICBM ban was controversial internally because it clashed with its modernization program. The "Midgetman" mobile ICBM was an important component of the plan that Reagan had agreed to in return for congressional funding for MX. In December 1986, the administration also decided to base MX on railcars, thereby making it a mobile ICBM. If this inconsistency remained, Nitze warned Reagan, "both our arms control position and your modernization decision would be seen as not serious."[148] US officials also admitted internally that mobile ICBMs were "potentially much more survivable than fixed ICBMs," which in theory would be stabilizing. In a contradiction to the administration's rhetoric of stability, officials argued that Soviet mobile ICBMs presented a problem because the United States had "no ability to effectively target [them], nor are we likely to have such a capability in the near future."[149]

Yet US intelligence analysts also recognized that the centrality of mobile ICBMs to Soviet plans to increase the survivability of its land-based strategic forces against "the counterforce threat from all legs of the US triad" meant that Moscow was unlikely to agree to a ban without reciprocal limits on US counterforce systems.[150] By November of 1987, most of Reagan's arms control advisors favored movement on mobile ICBMs, with the Department of Defense the only agency opposed.[151] However, the administration continued to hold out for further Soviet concessions in other areas such as counting rules, the separation of negotiations on offensive and defensive arms, and

142 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms [START I]"; "Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty: Definitions Annex," https://www.acq.osd.mil/asda/ssipm/sdc/tc/start1/START1-annex-definitions.html.

143 "Information Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Political and Military Affairs (Howe) and the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Burt) to Secretary of State Shultz," August 10, 1983, FRUS XI, 269.

144 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms [START I]."

145 "K peregovoram o bol'shei strategichaeskoi stabil'nosti i dal'neishemu sokrashcheniiu SNV (SNV-2) v period 30.5–4.6.1990 g." [Toward Negotiations on Greater Strategic Stability and the Further Reduction of Strategic Offensive Weapons (START II) in the period May 30–June 4, 1990], undated, Folder 2, Box 5, Vitaly Kataev Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.

146 "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," November 5, 1985, *FRUS* XI, 459; Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 128.

147 "Information Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research (Abramowitz) to Acting Secretary of State Whitehead," January 2, 1986, *FRUS* XI, 497.

148 "Memorandum from the Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State on Arms Control Matters (Nitze) to President Reagan," January 10, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 788.

149 "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," undated, *FRUS* XI, 876; "Paper Prepared by the Arms Control Support Group," undated, *FRUS* XI, 976–77.

150 "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," undated, *FRUS* XI, 876; "Paper Prepared by the Arms Control Support Group," undated, *FRUS* XI, 977.

151 "Paper Prepared by the Arms Control Support Group," *FRUS* XI, 977–79.

stricter sublimits, before agreeing to permit mobile ICBMs in the treaty.[152] Finally, in March 1988 US Secretary of State George Shultz told Shevardnadze that the United States would be willing to entertain the possibility of permitting mobile ICBMs "if adequate verification methods could be found."[153]

To address this change, Washington proposed a series of restrictions on the deployment of mobile ICBMs that, it argued, would not endanger the survivability of mobile ICBMs "unduly." These measures included the restriction of the systems to specified areas, which the missiles could leave "only with prior notification, and only a small portion of the force could be away at any given time."[154] Only once the Soviet Union had agreed to a detailed verification scheme, US officials agreed, would they be willing to discuss the numbers of permitted mobile ICBM launchers and warheads.[155]

The United States and the Soviet Union agreed on the broad concept of verification, but were divided on specifics. Moscow wanted greater flexibility to disperse its mobile ICBMs over a wider area to maintain their survivability. The Soviets proposed a Restricted Deployment Area of 100 square kilometers for day-to-day mobile ICBM activities, while the United States wanted a far more restrictive 25 square kilometers. Likewise, the Soviet Union proposed that 50 percent of all missiles assigned to a restricted deployment area could be outside that zone at any one time, while the United States proposed that only 30 percent could be so. Moscow also wanted to include a "larger deployment area," which would encompass several units. The only point on which the United States requested greater flexibility was in the ability to disperse its entire mobile ICBM force on exercise, whereas the Soviets proposed that only 50 percent of any unit should be on exercise at any one time.[156] With verification details still under dispute, Reagan officials did not formally renounce their position that mobile ICBMs would be banned, and therefore did not propose a mobile ICBM warhead limit. US officials did, however, argue privately that a limit of 500–700 mobile ICBM warheads would be acceptable, while the Soviet Union proposed a limit of 1,600.[157]

During the Bush administration, the two sides were able to compromise on a cap of 1,100 mobile ICBM warheads. Mobile ICBMs had to be based in a smaller "restricted area," of 5 square kilometers. These weapons could use a far larger "deployment area," of 125,000 square kilometers, for dispersals, but the other side had to be notified in advance. No more than 10 missiles could be based in any restricted area, and restricted areas could not overlap or use the same deployment area.[158] In short, mobile ICBMs were constrained in their movements, which facilitated verification, but this change also made them more easily trackable, targetable, and therefore less survivable. The Soviet victory on this issue, therefore, was significantly qualified.

Summing Up

The outcome of START I is summarized in table 2. As the table illustrates, the Soviet Union conceded on the majority of significant points of contention between the two superpowers regarding their divergent conceptions of strategic stability. These concessions included a failure to secure any guarantees regarding the linkage between strategic offensive forces and missile defenses, which was the cornerstone of the Soviet conception of strategic stability based on mutual vulnerability to a retaliatory strike.

The United States achieved its most important objective: to significantly reduce the threat posed by the Soviet heavy missile force. START I mandated deep cuts specifically targeted at the Soviet system, reducing the number of missiles by 50 percent to 154 and the number of warheads to 1,540, or 10 warheads per missile. The treaty also prohibited new types of heavy ICBMs and any "increase [in] the launch weight or throw weight of heavy ICBMs of an existing type."[159] This combination of cuts and modernization restrictions was far more restrictive than those applied to SLBMs. Without a separate SLBM sublimit, the United States retained more flexibility to shift warheads out to sea and was free to make improvements in accuracy that would make the Trident II SLBM a significant counterforce threat. In short, the structure of START I reflected the US

152 "Draft Telegram from the Department of State to the Delegation to the Nuclear and Space Talks in Geneva," undated, *FRUS* XI, 1157–58.

153 "Memorandum of Conversation," March 22, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1257.

154 "Memorandum of Conversation," March 23, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1263–64.

155 "Editorial Note," *FRUS* XI, 1395.

156 "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Powell) To President Reagan," September 12, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1502–4; "Memorandum of Conversation," September 22, 1988, 1520.

157 "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Powell) to President Reagan," May 20, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1384; "Memorandum of Conversation," September 22, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1520.

158 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms [START I]."

159 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms [START I]."

Table 2. Key elements of US and Soviet conceptions of strategic stability (1985) compared to the START I outcome (1991)

Issue	Initial US position	Initial Soviet position	START I outcome	US/Soviet win
Offensive–defense/space weapons linkage	Two areas should not be linked; new restrictions on missile defense/space weapons not required	Two areas should be linked; new restrictions in missile defense/space weapons required	No linkage; no new limits on missile defense/space weapons	US win
Heavy intercontinental ballistic missiles	Should be restricted more severely than other systems	Should not be restricted more severely than other systems	Restricted more severely than other systems	US win
Sea-launched cruise missiles	Should not be limited	Those with a range of over 600 km should be banned	Limited at high levels unverifiably and separately from main treaty limits	US-tilted compromise
Air-launched cruise missiles	Should be permitted	Those with a range of over 600 km should be banned	Permitted under liberal counting rules	US win
Mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles	Should be banned	Should be permitted	Permitted	Soviet win

contention that, because of their unique combination of vulnerability, the high proportion of Soviet warheads loaded on them, and their counterforce potential, Soviet heavy ICBMs were uniquely destabilizing, and that counterforce-capable US SLBMs did not represent the same level of danger because they were more survivable.

START I's emphasis on reducing Soviet heavy MIRVed ICBMs illustrates the selective way in which strategic stability was applied in the agreement. With its high vulnerability to a first strike, the large proportion of Soviet warheads loaded on them, and their utility as a counterforce weapon, the SS-18 possessed a combination of characteristics that made cuts a legitimate objective under any arms control agreement that sought to embed strategic stability through survivable second-strike forces. Yet START I's focus on specific cuts to the SS-18 was only justified if one viewed the weapon as a single system, in isolation from the broader context of the strategic balance. The SS-18 posed a limited counterforce threat to a US strategic arsenal that was increasingly dominated by survivable submarine-launched missiles. Moreover, the United States possessed other systems, such as Trident II D-5, ALCMs, and SLCMs, which—though more survivable than the SS-18—possessed counterforce capabilities that made them destabilizing, particularly against the predominantly land-based Soviet strategic forces. Yet despite this capability, these systems were subject to far looser restraints than those of the SS-18 and land-based MIRVed ICBMs generally. This difference reflected the United States' conception of strategic stability, derived from its military objectives, which emphasized a weapons system's survivability to a greater extent than its counterforce potential, and placed an inordinate emphasis on the SS-18 as singularly destabilizing in isolation from the broader strategic balance.

Overall, START I's system of counting rules, sublimits, and omissions left the United States with the ability to deploy more warheads and make the most of its edge in advanced counterforce technology.

By conceding to limits on ALCM and non-ALCM heavy-bomber armament that US officials privately described as "highly permissive," Moscow agreed to treatment of heavy bombers as slow-flying second-strike weapons that did not require the same level of restrictions as other forces.[160] START I counted heavy bombers as carrying one warhead if they were fitted for non-ALCM armament, even though they could carry significantly more, while the first 150 US ALCM-armed bombers were counted as car-

160 "Information Memorandum from the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Solomon) to Secretary of State Shultz," January 27, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1177.

rying 10 long-range cruise missiles, even though they could carry 20.[161] Under these limits, US officials believed that Washington could deploy as many as 9,500 warheads while the Soviets would be restricted to approximately 7,000. Soviet concessions in this area were so great that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Crowe, admitted that he was "not sure [he] could explain why" the Soviets had agreed to the non-ALCM bomber armament counting rule.[162] Similarly, by placing high, permissive, and unverifiable limits on SLCMs outside of the main treaty, START I had only gone a very limited way toward the Soviet position that these systems represented a significant threat to strategic stability.

Overall, START I's system of counting rules, sublimits, and omissions left the United States with the ability to deploy more warheads and make the most of its edge in advanced counterforce technology. START I would thereby facilitate the United States' continued transition to a force that was less reliant on land-based ICBMs and therefore more survivable, but, US analysts recognized privately, would "be capable of performing a full range of US deterrent missions," including the destruction of hard targets.[163]

Despite the extent to which the United States' conception of strategic stability had emerged triumphant in the negotiations, both sides continued to use the term to characterize the treaty's outcome. The preamble to START I reflected this victory by explicitly stating that "the interests of the parties and the interests of international security require the strengthening of strategic stability," marking the dawn of a new era in which this new Reaganite conception would become the dominant one in superpower strategic arms control.[164]

Given the extent to which START I reflected the US vision of strategic stability, it is not surprising that stability rhetoric was at the forefront of the Bush administration's presentation of the treaty. As US Secretary of State James Baker argued before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, START I would "first and foremost . . . reduce the risk of nuclear war by reducing levels of strategic forces in a stabilizing manner."[165] Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell stated that START I had secured "our original 1982 strategic arms reduction goals," including to "achieve stability through significant reductions in the most destabilizing nuclear systems, ballistic missiles and especially ICBMs which have multiple warheads." Powell also argued that under START and other measures, the United States' "more capable weapons systems will allow us to maintain approximately the same levels of damage and target coverage that we can achieve today," while allowing the US to transition to a more survivable force, more dependent on SLBMs and bomber weapons at the expense of ICBMs. Powell posited that START I also allowed the US to pursue "efforts to provide further stability" through its ongoing missile defense efforts.[166]

Soviet Motivations

The Soviet government's continued use of stability language, even as the final treaty text reflected Washington's conception of strategic stability to a far greater extent than Moscow's, is more difficult to explain. Top-level ignorance of Soviet concessions was not the reason. Gorbachev was deeply engaged in the negotiations and highly aware of the relative balance of concessions.[167] Compared to the huge moves the Soviet Union had made, he complained to Baker, "American concessions are just sunflower seeds."[168] Yet he continued to describe the outcome of the talks as reinforcing strategic stability, even as the US conception of that term became dominant.

Gorbachev persisted nevertheless, partly because he believed it was the right thing to do. He did not believe that advantages in the nuclear balance were meaningful in a world in which both the United States and the Soviet Union had forces sufficient to destroy the other. "Strategic parity means that we have a reliable guarantee of the defense of our country," Gorbachev argued during a heated Politburo debate in May 1987. He continued: "The enemy will not attack us because in that case it would receive an unacceptable retaliatory strike." This would be sufficient, Gorbachev

161 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms [START I]."

162 "Minutes of a Meeting," August 11, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1473.

163 "Information Memorandum from the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Solomon) to Secretary of State Shultz," January 27, 1988, *FRUS* XI, 1176.

164 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms [START I]."

165 "START Treaty," Hearing Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 23, 1992, C-SPAN, https://www.c-span.org/video/?26733-1/start-treaty.

166 "START Treaty," Hearing Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 26, 1992, C-SPAN, https://www.c-span.org/video/?26783-1/start-treaty.

167 Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 128.

168 "Record of Conversation Between M. S. Gorbachev and US Secretary of State J. Baker," May 18, 1990, Thomas Blanton and Svetlana Savranskaya, eds., *The Washington/Camp David Summit 30 Years Ago*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2020-06-02/washington-camp-david-summit-30-years-ago.

argued, "but if we start counting—they have a rifle, we have a rifle—then we can forget about building socialism." Economic reform and Soviet revival required control of the competition with the United States. In this context, maintaining marginal advantages in different systems was far less important to Gorbachev than avoiding "another round of the arms race."[169] The General Secretary was therefore "willing to pay dearly" for arms control agreements, Michael Krepon writes, "in a currency he didn't believe in."[170]

Parts of the Soviet bureaucracy supported these concessions. Experts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs endorsed Gorbachev's strategy, because they believed that the Soviet force heavily reliant on highly MIRVed silo-based ICBMs was increasingly vulnerable to a US first strike and therefore destabilizing. These experts supported Soviet concessions at START that would facilitate a shift toward a more balanced force that placed greater emphasis on less vulnerable mobile land-based missiles, submarines, and bombers. In this sense, these officials shared an agenda with US policymakers who wanted to restructure Soviet forces by reducing Moscow's reliance on highly MIRVed ICBMs.[171]

The Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs also occasionally found allies within the military. For example, from 1987 onwards the Soviet Air Force and aerospace industry officials supported the movement in the Soviet START position toward more liberal counting rules for ALCMs on heavy bombers, because these officials wanted to expand their strategic role. These officials did not foresee the collapse of the USSR and so were looking beyond START, toward a future in which the Soviets would continue to compete with the United States in new systems. By late 1991, once it became clear that funding for new aircraft and missiles would not be forthcoming, the Air Force reversed its position and opposed START I.[172] Soviet concessions therefore enjoyed momentary and opportunistic support at times from parts of the military and military industry in the fight to preserve or expand the resources available to them.

Gorbachev also hoped that his big moves would stimulate reciprocal concessions from the United States. The General Secretary argued to his Politburo colleagues that the Reagan administration was under international pressure to improve relations with the Soviet Union. In meeting with Reagan and displaying flexibility on certain points—but maintaining firm positions on key questions such as SDI—Gorbachev hoped to influence Western opinion in favor of an agreement, while at the same time pushing the United States into meeting him halfway on issues such as missile defense.[173] Gorbachev described the 1986 Reykjavik summit as part of a "peace offensive" that would open "up great new opportunities for everyone to understand what is happening—for Europeans, for Americans, and for ourselves."[174] The West, Gorbachev held, was also experiencing "difficulties, also related to the arms race . . . Therefore, they also have a growing understanding that it is necessary to conduct business with the USSR in a new way."[175]

In this view, Gorbachev was guilty of mirror imaging. After the peak of the Western antinuclear movement in the early 1980s, defused in part by the Reagan administration's adoption of strategic stability rhetoric, the pressure on US policymakers was never as great as on the Soviet side. US officials worried that Gorbachev's rhetoric, combined with his eye-catching diplomatic moves and personal appeals to Reagan during summit meetings, would undermine support for the United States' position. In general, though, US officials were able to keep those tendencies in check by arguing that the United States needed to stay the course on new programs given the continuing threat posed by Soviet forces, and the uncertain outcome of both Soviet reform and the START negotiations.[176]

As the Soviet economy unraveled beginning in

169 Sergei Radchenko, *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 547–48; Sergei Radchenko, "Mikhail Gorbachev: The Anatomy of New Thinking," in Monteiro and Bartel, *Before and After the Fall*, 49–50. "Notes of CC CPSU Politburo Session, May 8, 1987," in Svetlana Savranksaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok, eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe* (Central European University Press, 2010), 249–52.

170 Krepon, *Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace*, 253.

171 Sokov, *Russian Strategic Modernization*, 55–84.

172 Sokov, *Russian Strategic Modernization*, 57–65.

173 Politburo, October 8, 1986, in Anatoli Cherniaev, ed., *V Politburo TsK KPSS: Po zapisiam Anatoliia Cherniaeva, Vadima Medvedeva, Georgiia Shakhnazarova (1985–1991)* [In the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Through the Notes of Anatoly Charniaev, Vadim Medvedev and Georgii Shakhnazarov] (Gorbachev Foundation, 2008), 82–83; "O direktivakh dlia delegatsii SSSR na peregovorakh po SNV v Zheneve," [On Directives for the USSR Delegation to the START Negotiations in Geneva], October 30, 1986, Cherniaev, *V Politburo TsK KPSS,* 100–1.

174 Radchenko, *To Run the World*, 549–53; Radchenko, "Mikhail Gorbachev," 51–55; "Ob itogakh vstrechi v Reik'iavike," [On the Results of the Meeting in Reykjavik], October 14, 1986, *V Politburo TsK KPSS,* 85.

175 "Ob itogakh vizita Shul'tsa v SSSR," [On the Results of Shultz's Visit to the USSR], February 25, 1988, *V Politburo TsK KPSS*, 291; Elizabeth C. Charles, "Gorbachev and the Decision to Decouple the Arms Control Package: How the Breakdown of the Reykjavik Summit Led to the Elimination of the Euromissiles," in Leopoldo Nuti et al., eds, *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Stanford University Press, 2015), 76–80.

176 Colbourn, *Euromissiles*, 219–32; Freeman, *Dreams for a Decade*, 183–86; "Information Memorandum from the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Solomon) to Secretary of State Shultz," January 2, 1987, *FRUS* XI, 778–82; Dick Cheney, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress,* January 1991 (US Government Printing Office, 1991), 51–53.

the late 1980s, Gorbachev's concessions to the United States were motivated less by an expectation of reciprocal moves and more by a need for economic breathing space and ultimately Western financial support.[177] Despite continuing to argue that his reforms promised a transformation in East-West relations, Gorbachev also conceded in February 1988 that "without a significant reduction in military spending," the Soviet Union would "not be able to solve the problems of *perestroika*."[178] By the summer of 1991, the upcoming G-7 meeting in London—and its potential for a significant aid package to prop up Soviet finances—lay behind Gorbachev's haste to resolve the final outstanding START issues to Washington's satisfaction.[179]

In this context, the rhetoric of strategic stability provided a means for Gorbachev to save face, both domestically and to his American counterparts. Cutting against his regular complaints about lopsided concessions, at the Moscow Summit of July 1991 Gorbachev described strategic stability as characterized by "military parity" and "equality."[180] Gorbachev still clung to the notion that strategic stability meant equality, therefore, even if it were more aspiration than reality under START I.

Maintaining the rhetoric of strategic stability also provided an aspirational baseline for the next phase of strategic arms reduction. The two sides had already committed publicly in June 1990 to a new round of strategic arms reductions that would "ensure strategic stability" by measures to "improve survivability, remove incentives for a nuclear first strike and implement an appropriate relationship between strategic offenses and defenses."[181] Gorbachev's advisors saw new strategic stability talks as a way to redress some of the shortcomings of the emerging START I treaty, including its lack of restrictions on the counterforce capabilities of both advanced conventional and nuclear systems, its system of counting rules that favored the United States, and its failure to address challenges posed by strategic defenses.[182]

Characteristically, Gorbachev had something even more ambitious in mind. During the US-Soviet Moscow Summit in the summer of 1991 at which they signed START I, Gorbachev proposed to Bush that the Soviet Union and the United States could reorient their relations based on "a new concept of strategic stability," founded not only on maintaining the bilateral military balance between them, but also joint US-Soviet interest in preserving "political and economic" stability in Europe, coordinating policy in southern Africa, and agreeing on their approaches to "India and China." Gorbachev ranged widely from topic to topic, addressing "the problem of resources, water, the environment" and the "doubling of the earth's population in 30–50 years."[183] Strategic stability, therefore, remained a key concept in Gorbachev's attempts to use arms control as a tool of "global leadership" until the last months of the Soviet Union.[184]

Rather than reaching a new grand bargain with Moscow, the Bush administration was preoccupied with Gorbachev's increasingly tenuous hold on power and the security of the Soviet nuclear stockpile.

The US reaction to Gorbachev's proposal at the 1991 Moscow Summit was reserved. Bush addressed each issue the Soviet president raised separately, without mentioning Gorbachev's new strategic stability concept.[185] This approach could be seen as a

177 Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants*, 128.

178 "Ob itogakh vizita Shul'tsa v SSSR," 291.

179 Vladislav M. Zubok, *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union* (Yale University Press, 2021), 248–53.

180 "Record of the Main Content of Conversation Between Bush and Gorbachev, Novo-Ogarevo," July 31, 1991, Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., *Gorbachev and Bush: The Last Superpower Summits that Ended the Cold War* (Central European University Press, 2020), 412.

181 "Soviet-United States Joint Statement on Future Negotiations on Nuclear and Space Arms and Further Enhancing Strategic Stability," June 1, 1990, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/1938-

182 Lev Zaikov, Vladimir Kriuchkov, Eduard Shevardnadze, Dmitri Iazov, and Ivan Belousov, "O kontseptsii budushchikh peregovorov po iadernym i kosmicheskim vooorezheniiam i strategichestoi stabil'nosti," [On the Concept of Future Negotiations on Nuclear and Space Armaments and Strategic Stability] and attachment, draft, 30 August 1990, Folder 47, Box 4, Vitaly Kataev Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.

183 "Record of the Main Content of Conversation Between Bush and Gorbachev, Novo-Ogarevo," 412–13.

184 Radchenko, *To Run the World*, 550; Radchenko, "Mikhail Gorbachev," 45–61.

185 "Record of the Main Content of Conversation Between Bush and Gorbachev, Novo-Ogarevo," 414–15.

product of Bush's aversion to "the vision thing," as he described it.[186] It also, however, reflected the relative decline of the US-Soviet relationship as the organizing framework for Washington's national security policy, given the new and rapidly growing asymmetry in power between the two countries.

The United States was entering a period in which it stood without peer, and the Bush administration did not want to be constrained by any agreements with the Soviet Union that could negatively impact the ability of the US to act on a global scale. Secretary of State Baker had already pushed back on Soviet attempts to constrain the United States' conventional cruise missile program, in part, as he wrote Shevardnadze in October 1990, because Washington could not "permit START to limit our conventional capabilities." Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait that August, Baker emphasized, "underscore[d]" for the United States "the importance of preserving non-nuclear options."[187] The US-led coalition's lightning conventional victory against Iraq in January–February 1991, thanks in part to cruise missiles and other advanced US capabilities such as stealth, would bear out Baker's point.

Rather than reaching a new grand bargain with Moscow, the Bush administration was preoccupied with Gorbachev's increasingly tenuous hold on power and the security of the Soviet nuclear stockpile. By early 1991, Washington became concerned that Gorbachev would not remain in office long enough to finish the START treaty.[188] These worries proved to be premature. After the failed putsch of August 1991, however, more immediate US concerns regarding the security of Moscow's nuclear arsenal overrode discussion of new strategic stability concepts as the Soviet Union fell apart.[189]

Conclusion

Arms control was a central focus for contemporary observers who monitored the ups and downs of superpower relations during the middle years of the Cold War, but the end of that confrontation seemingly rendered it an anachronism. Linkage between offensive and defensive systems and relative advantage in counterforce capabilities hardly seemed important when weighed against the fall of the Berlin Wall, the liberation of Eastern Europe, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even before the USSR's denouement in December 1991, a Congressional Budget Office assessment of START I admitted that "events of greater note have already overshadowed [the treaty]."[190]

Yet START I's significance increases if we accept Mary Sarotte's injunction to see the later years of the Cold War "as a time not of ending, but of beginning."[191] The START negotiations between 1982 and 1991—with their move from limits to reductions, and with the nature of those reductions—fundamentally reshaped a key element of the global nuclear order and provided a bridge between the Cold War and post–Cold War era. This development included the basic elements of strategic stability the United States and Soviet Union had agreed to in START I.

Though strategic arms control would lose its political salience after 1991, in broad terms it followed the lines set down by the Reagan and Bush administrations.[192] The 1993 START II agreement would go even further than START I in its focus on ICBMs, by mandating the elimination of all heavy ICBMs and MIRVed ICBMs of any type, while permitting continued MIRVing of SLBMs.[193] The United States' withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002 completed a process that had begun with the delinking of strategic offensive and defensive arms control in the START I agreement. Though he denounced START II in response to the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, new Russian President Vladimir Putin subsequently agreed to further cuts in the strategic arsenals of the two powers down to 1,700–2,200 warheads in 2002.[194] Signed in a very different context to START I, the 2010 US-Russia New START treaty still reflected key elements of late Cold War US priorities: strict limitation of offensive nuclear forces only, rather than all counterforce-capable weapons; no formal linkage between restrictions on strategic offensive and defensive systems; liberal counting rules for

186 Robert Ajemian, "Where Is the Real George Bush?" *Time*, January 26, 1987, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,963342-2,00.html.

187 "Official Letter from J. Baker to E. Shevardnadze, October 1," Folder 52, Box 4, Vitaly Kataev Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.

188 Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, "The Moscow Summit, 1991," in Savranskaya and Blanton, eds., *Gorbachev and Bush*, 323.

189 "Cable from American Embassy in Moscow to the Secretary of State, Secret/Specat," October 7, 1991, *Unilateral US Nuclear Pullback in 1991 Matched by Rapid Soviet Cuts,* National Security Archive, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22053-document-08-cable-american-embassy.

190 Congressional Budget Office, *The START Treaty and Beyond,* October 1991, iii, https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/102nd-congress-1991-1992/reports/1991_10_thestarttreaty.pdf.

191 Sarotte, *1989*, 3.

192 Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 81–82.

193 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START II)," January 3, 1993, https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102887.htm.

194 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Strategic Offensive Reductions," May 24, 2002, https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/ac/trt/18016.htm#1.

bomber weapons; and no limits on counterforce-enabling modernization.[195]

Old US-Soviet debates over strategic stability found an echo in US-Russia exchanges on strategic arms control prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Since the conclusion of the New START treaty, Russia has consistently held that any follow-on agreement should expand beyond strategic offensive nuclear arms to include missile defense, counterforce-capable conventional weapons, and "space weapons."[196] In the context of the START I negotiations, Moscow's position can be viewed as an attempt to recover several of the concessions that Gorbachev made in the waning years of the Cold War.[197] For its part, the United States continues to maintain that negotiations should focus on offensive nuclear forces only, but in addition to strategic offensive forces, talks should include restrictions on Moscow's significant stockpile of nonstrategic nuclear weapons.[198]

The United States' commitment to the established framework is not surprising if one considers the resounding success of its reformulation of strategic stability during the 1980s. As it did in other areas, notably on human rights, in the face of significant domestic and international opposition to its early policies, the Reagan administration adopted an established concept that was potentially hostile to its goals, retaining the name but refashioning its content to reflect the administration's priorities.[199] In doing so, the US created a powerful instrument to legitimate the tilt in the nuclear balance against the Soviet Union and to pursue US military primacy.[200] In the post–Cold War period, this Reaganite conception of strategic stability has helped to legitimate the United States' dual pursuit of further reductions in the numbers of strategic offensive weapons, alongside significant advances in counterforce-capable strategic systems, in a way that has further advanced this primacy.[201]

The Soviet government also adopted the rhetoric of strategic stability as an instrument to further its own objectives. In the face of the risks that the Reagan administration's strategic buildup and SDI posed to its strategic deterrent, the Soviet Union had a pragmatic incentive to criticize and argue for a treaty based on stability through mutual vulnerability. This approach, combined with a shift toward a more diversified nuclear posture less reliant on vulnerable, highly MIRVed, silo-based ICBMs, would help maintain the retaliatory viability of the Soviet arsenal. Once the Soviet Union began to make significant concessions in START, the rhetoric of strategic stability allowed Gorbachev to maintain the veneer of US-Soviet parity. Gorbachev and his advisors also harbored vain hopes that they could continue to press the United States to rein in its military-technical advantages in the name of strategic stability, or even engage in a fundamental reconfiguration of US-Soviet relations based on an expanded definition of the term. These hopes came to nothing, but this line of thinking illustrates how Moscow continued to see strategic stability as a useful tool to advance its interests.

In sum, both the United States and the Soviet Union employed strategic stability as rhetorical window dressing to legitimate and advance their own preexisting priorities. As such, strategic stability did not play a significant independent role in determining the outcome of US-Soviet arms control negotiations at the end of the Cold War. The United States won the contest over whose conception of strategic stability would frame START I, not because its conception was any more coherent or comprehensive, but because the United States was able to hold out longer than the Soviet Union on most questions. These issues included restrictions on missile defense and on several types of counterforce systems, on which Soviet views hewed closer to the traditional Schelling-Halperin conception of strategic stability based on mutual vulnerability than those of the United States. As Moscow became progressively weaker economically, it made more and more concessions to Washington's conception of strategic stability, such

195 "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms," April 8, 2010, https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf; Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 478.

196 Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 81-82; Nikolai Sokov, "A Non-Ideological Reframing of the US-Russia Arms Control Agenda," CNS Issue Brief, December 2016, https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A-Non-Ideological-Reframing-of-US-Russian-Arms-Control-Agenda.pdf.

197 Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 481–82; "Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's Remarks at the Russia-US Dialogue on Nuclear Issues," December 7, 2020, https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/201207_deputy_foreign_minister_sergey_ryabkov_remarks.pdf.

198 "Under Secretary Bonnie Jenkins' Remarks: Nuclear Arms Control: A New Era?" September 6, 2021, https://2021-2025.state.gov/under-secretary-bonnie-jenkins-remarks-nuclear-arms-control-a-new-era/; Gallagher, "Re-Thinking the Unthinkable," 481.

199 William Michael Schmidli, "Reframing Human Rights: Reagan's 'Project Democracy' and the US Intervention in Nicaragua," in Hunt and Miles, eds., *The Reagan Moment*, 237–59; William Michael Schmidli, *Freedom on the Offensive: Human Rights, Democracy Promotion and US Intervention in the Late Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2022); Rasmus Sinding Søndergaard, *Reagan, Congress, and Human Rights: Contesting Morality in US Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

200 For more on liberal rhetoric as an instrument for legitimating US primacy, see Stacie E. Goddard and Ronald R. Krebs, "Legitimating Primacy After the Cold War: How Liberal Talk Matters to US Foreign Policy," in Monteiro and Bartel, *Before and After the Fall*, 132–50.

201 Lieber and Press, "The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of US Primacy," 7–44; Lieber and Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence," 9–49; Maurer, *Competitive Arms Control*, 182–84.

that the US version was incorporated into START I largely unaltered.

The US vision of strategic stability of the 1980s thereby played a significant role in laying the conceptual basis for post–Cold War US-Russia arms control. Until the expiry of the tottering New START treaty in 2026, at least, we still live in Reagan's world.

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Image: *President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev at The Signing of The Inf Treaty in The East Room (1987). The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*[202]

202 For the image, see https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75855875