CHAPTER 7

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY, ARMS CONTROL, AND THE US AIR FORCE: THE REAGAN YEARS, 1981-1988

Forrest E. Waller, Jr.

The Reagan Administration took office in 1981 having made arms control a national issue during the presidential campaign of the preceding year. Governor Reagan believed that the US-Soviet SALT II Treaty sacrificed important American strategic interests and presented to the Soviet Union unilateral strategic advantages. Reagan objected to the treaty on four grounds. First, SALT II did not address the most pressing strategic nuclear issue facing both sides, the potential growth in deployed nuclear weapons. SALT II capped deployed delivery systems, but it did not limit growth in deployed warheads. The United States and Soviet Union had begun to deploy Multiple Independently Targeted Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) aboard strategic ballistic missiles in the mid/late 1970s. MIRV technology caused deployed warhead numbers to grow geometrically. The United States deployed MIRVs first and enjoyed an initial advantage. However, the Soviet Union had made a larger investment in ballistic missile forces than the United States. And Soviet missiles carried larger payloads. The combination of more missiles and greater missile throw-weight meant that the Soviet Union had the ability to deploy significantly more nuclear weapons than the United States unless Washington chose to expand its retaliatory force. An expansion of the nuclear arms race did not promise to contribute to US security, and in Reagan's view neither did a nuclear arms control treaty that failed to reduce warhead numbers.

Second, Reagan believed that SALT II failed to contribute to nuclear stability. The treaty allowed only the Soviet Union to have heavy ICBMs. Soviet heavy ICBMs armed with MIRVs had the combination of warhead yield, warhead numbers, and missile accuracy to carry out a devastating first strike on American land-based nuclear forces and their command and control systems. Many defense analysts feared that Soviet heavy ICBMs had inherent combat characteristics that would lead to early use of nuclear weapons in a crisis, exactly the situation all analysts believed must be avoided. Reagan did not want an equal US right to deploy heavy ICBMs. He wanted an arms control agreement that preferentially reduced destabilizing weapon systems, particularly heavy ICBMs.

Third, Reagan agreed with many other US political figures (e.g., Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, D-WA) that bilateral arms control agreements

should be equal agreements. Arms control treaties must not grant special privileges or advantages to one side or the other. The Carter Administration had violated this principle when it granted Moscow the unilateral right to possess heavy ICBMs.

Last, Reagan believed, as a matter of principle, that arms control agreements must be verifiable. The Islamic Revolution in Iran had resulted in loss of important US technical intelligence collection capabilities needed to verify Soviet strategic nuclear programs. Many defense analysts doubted whether the United States could verify SALT II effectively without some form of on-site inspection. Since SALT II had no provision for inspections, Reagan believed the treaty failed to meet a fundamental arms control requirement. For all these reasons, the Reagan Administration concluded that SALT II was fatally flawed. The administration did not pursue the treaty or attempt to secure the Senate's advice and consent to ratification, although Reagan did not formally abandon SALT II until well into his second term. Reagan replaced the failed Strategic Arms Limitation Talks with a more ambitious effort, the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START). The objectives of START were a 50 per cent reduction in strategic nuclear warheads, selective emphasis on the most destabilizing nuclear systems (ICBMs), equality between the parties, and effective verification.

During the Reagan years, United States arms control institutions reached their evolutionary peak. These institutions were found in the bureaus of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, bureaus of the Department of State, Directorate for International Negotiations of the Joint Staff, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Directorate for National Security Programs of the Department of Energy, and Arms Control Intelligence Staff of the Director of Central Intelligence. In addition, each of the Armed Services had arms control staffs at their headquarters in Washington and also in their major commands. During this period, the United States government arms control effort employed an estimated 2500-3000 civilian and military personnel. Many of these people had supported, or negotiated, arms control treaties for more than 20 years.

Similarly, the Air Force organizations responsible for arms control matters were at their evolutionary peak. They included the International Negotiations Division of Headquarters Air Force, Air Force Studies and Analysis, Directorate for Intelligence Estimates of Air Force Intelligence, and Directorate for Plans at Strategic Air Command (SAC). The burden of arms control policy, negotiation support, treaty implementation and compliance fell to the Air Staff's International Negotiations Division. Although it began as a small staff in the early 1980s, it had grown to

become one of the largest divisions in Headquarters Air Force by the late 1980s. More than two dozen officers were assigned to the division.

THE CHALLENGE

Within the US national security community, there was general agreement on the nature of the arms control challenge facing the United States, particularly in the nuclear arena. The National Intelligence Officer for Strategic Programs during this period, Dr. Lawrence Gershwin, completed annually a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE 11-3/8) entitled *Soviet Forces and Capabilities for Intercontinental Nuclear Conflict*. The estimate projected Soviet strategic nuclear force growth for the next ten years. Even at the lower end of the projections, the Estimate forecast that Soviet strategic nuclear forces would reach numerical and technological equality with the United States no later than the late 1990s. At the higher end of the projections, the Estimate forecast Soviet levels of deployed warheads that would have required the US to undertake expensive modernization programs just to stay even. Gershwin's NIE findings informed two other important studies of US-Soviet nuclear forces: the Joint Staff's *Red Integrated Strategic Offensive Plan (RISOP)* and the Office of Net Assessment's judgments about the relative strengths of Soviet strategic nuclear forces and US. The former evaluated how well US forces could achieve their wartime objectives. The latter assessed whether trends in the respective strategic forces resulted in net advantages for one side or the other. Each of these efforts underscored the need for strategic nuclear arms control, because additional strategic nuclear weapons appeared to add nothing to US and allied security, nuclear stability, or the predictability of the US-Soviet strategic relationship.

American allies strongly supported strategic nuclear arms control as a means of improving security, stability, and predictability with the Eastern Bloc. Allied public support for nuclear arms reductions was very strong, as was public opposition to the deployment of new nuclear systems. One of the great challenges to NATO solidarity during the Reagan years was the deployment of intermediate nuclear forces in Western Europe as part of the dual-track decision. Public demonstrations against deployment of US Pershing IIs and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe occurred in nearly every NATO country. Public support for nuclear arms control was strong in the United States, too. American Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter condemning the nuclear arms race and US nuclear deterrence policies. Large demonstrations occurred at US nuclear weapon development facilities. And many in the US Congress supported the

Zablocki Amendment, legislation requiring a moratorium on nuclear testing. Western publics looked to arms control to moderate the arms race, establish a nuclear balance of power, and improve mutual confidence. Essentially, the Western publics expected successful nuclear arms control efforts to lead to "normal" political relations between the United States and Soviet Union. Most arms control professionals were less optimistic about the contribution they thought arms control could make.

ARMS CONTROL EFFORTS

The Reagan years were a period of intense arms control activity. Much of that activity succeeded, although not during his time in office. So successful were the efforts Reagan began that the Department of Defense feared in the early 1990s that it might be required to implement simultaneously the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Chemical Weapons Convention, and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. In addition, four utilitarian arms control arrangements either were signed or entered into force during the Reagan years. These included the Convention on Conventional Weapons (Land Mine Protocol), CSCE Stockholm Document, Missile Technology Control Regime, and Ballistic Missile Launch Notification Agreement.

Arms control activities during the Reagan years set the stage for the unsurpassed successes that occurred during "Reagan III" the administration of President George Bush. More than a dozen treaties were signed or entered into force during his administration. The Reagan years set the stage for arms control policy to become one of the most successful policy arenas in which the United States government operated.

The United States Air Force, like the other Armed Services, routinely supported US national arms control objectives. In general, Air Force senior staff understood the impact arms control could have on shaping the threat environment and adding predictability to it. Air Force senior staff also appreciated that Congress liked to see progress in arms control before agreeing to nuclear modernization programs. The Air Force had been a strong supporter of SALT II. Among the Joint Chiefs of Staff, only General Lew Allen, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, had strayed beyond the weak JCS characterization, "a modest but useful step," in describing the SALT II Treaty. The Air Force supported SALT II, because it contributed to concrete Air Force objectives and strategic force modernization.

The Air Force's primary arms control objective during the late Cold War period was force structure preservation. Many of the arms control initiatives of the period had arms reduction as a goal. The Air Staff division

responsible for arms control coordinated closely with the Air Force Major Commands (MAJCOMs) most affected by these initiatives: Strategic Air Command, Tactical Air Command, and US Air Forces Europe. Long arms control negotiations, which were the rule, facilitated internal Air Force coordination. The joint organizational arrangements and authorities in effect at the time maximized Air Force influence in its areas of responsibility. The Air Staff's relationship with Strategic Air Command was particularly close and institutionally significant for the Air Force arms control effort.

Headquarters SAC was unique in the Department of Defense and in the Air Force. The only Specified Command (a single-service combat command controlled by the National Command Authority) and an Air Force Major Command, SAC was the United States' principal nuclear warfighter. With its commanding sense of institutional identity and operational focus, SAC was older than the US Air Force and without peer within it. And in the Department of Defense, only one institution, the United States Marine Corps, was its analog. Strategic Air Command was the training ground for virtually all Air Force staff officers assigned to arms control positions in the Department of Defense. Assignment to influential arms control billets on the Air Staff or elsewhere came at the approval or with the recommendation of SAC's senior staff.

Preservation of operational flexibility was another Air Force arms control objective. Arms control negotiations during this period increasingly ventured beyond limiting numbers of "things" to restricting production, testing, R&D, training, and deployment of forces. Air Force doctrine was undergoing a rebirth during the late Cold War period owing to the rapid expansion in precision-munitions technology. Arms control agreements potentially prohibited the Air Force from waging the kind of air warfare that its advanced technology permitted and its modern doctrine demanded.

THE LINK BETWEEN NATIONAL AND AIR FORCE ARMS CONTROL OBJECTIVES

In general, the United States government sought three objectives in its arms control initiatives: security, stability, and predictability. Most administrations defined security as preserving the peace by reducing the likelihood of war, improving relations with adversaries, and strengthening alliances. Arms control was said to contribute directly to the first two and indirectly, through allied consultation, with the last.

Security. The Air Force defined security in concrete terms. Arms control advanced US security when it allowed the Air Force to meet

Commander-in-Chief (CINC) requirements and support the warfighter's objectives. In the strategic arms control arena, the requirements of the Single Integrated Operations Plan (SIOP) dominated all other considerations. Air Force arms control staffs paid close attention to force structure objectives, modernization requirements, war plans, mission needs statements, and operational requirements documents in their analysis of arms control positions. In particular, they paid attention to SAC. Arms control contributed to the Air Force objectives by shaping the threat environment and protecting Air Force operational preferences.

Stability. The United States government tended to define stability in terms of the arms race, crisis management, intra-war deterrence, and escalation control. Arms control contributed to these by reducing incentives the forces themselves may have added to unwanted escalation. The Air Force defined stability as numerical balance between opposing forces. In so doing, the Air Force sought to protect the qualitative advantages resident in its own forces and in Air Force operational practices. The Air Force and Strategic Air Command were persuaded that—weapon-for-weapon and man-for-man—SAC combat crews, US technology, and Air Force operational practices were far superior to their Soviet adversary.

Predictability. The United States government defined predictability as a process resulting in increased defense planning certainty, confidence in arms control compliance, and ability to take corrective steps to restore stability. Arms control contributed to predictability by creating regimes for verification, confidence building, and transparency. The Air Force wanted to be certain that arms control agreements would permit it to operate its forces according to its preferred operational style.

The Air Force clearly had a narrower perspective, operated at a different level of detail, and spoke a different arms control dialect than the national government. These differences are illustrated most clearly in the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks. Prior to the START negotiations, Strategic Air Command and the Joint Staff completed a deterrence study identifying a requirement for many thousands of warheads to carry out the SIOP with a responsible degree of risk. The Reagan Administration had settled on a 50 per cent reduction in strategic nuclear warheads, and then specified a ceiling of 6000 warheads. The 6000 warhead ceiling was thousands of warheads lower than the SIOP requirement. The administration's 50 per cent/6000 warhead decision set the Air Force's nuclear arms control agenda for the next nine years. Fundamentally, the disconnection between the arms control objective and the warfighting objective required something to "give." The Air Force's goal was to make sure that the administration's 6000 warhead ceiling literally did not mean what it said.

The Air Force was most concerned about its heavy bomber force structure. Heavy bombers carried more warheads than the other legs of the TRIAD under some conditions, and their value was constantly being questioned due to the strength of Soviet air defenses. A 6000-warhead limit promised to cut the bomber force significantly. Over a period of eight years, the Air Staff, SAC, and Joint Staff supported a series of arms control positions that effectively discounted the number of weapons attributed to heavy bombers. These positions included:

- **Attributing no nuclear weapons to heavy bombers.** Heavy bombers had not been included in SALT II limits, and the Air Force tried to continue the practice. The argument for overlooking heavy bombers was that they contributed to nuclear stability. That is, they were incapable of carrying out a first strike and were ideally suited to retaliation. The United States government argued this position in Presidential Summits and in Geneva negotiations for two years. Eventually, the US had to discard the position. Frankly, it was preposterous to exclude all heavy bomber weapons from accountability, particularly as the United States and Soviet Union were deploying air-launched cruise missiles on a larger fraction of their respective bomber forces.
- **Attributing only one warhead to each heavy bomber.** This position was just as unacceptable as attributing no weapons to heavy bombers for exactly the same reasons.
- **Attributing one warhead to each penetrating heavy bomber and ten warheads to each bomber equipped for cruise missiles.** This position was known as the bomber discount rule, and eventually both sides accepted it. Although it substantially increased the number of warheads attributed to the US heavy bomber force, it allowed the Air Force to preserve the bomber force structure called for in its programmatic plans at the time. The Soviets also received favorable treatment for its heavy bombers. Soviet long-range naval aviation flew heavy bombers for anti-submarine warfare, surface strike, and reconnaissance purposes. All these were excluded from the count, even though the majority of them were capable of delivering nuclear weapons against targets in US territory. All Soviet BACKFIRE bombers, a nuclear-armed intermediate-range bomber whose

range allowed it to strike targets across the United States from bases in the northern USSR, were ignored.

- **Change the range criterion in the definition of a Long-range Nuclear Air-Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM).** The effect of this definitional change was to redefine most US ALCM-equipped heavy bombers as penetrating heavy bombers. With more headroom on the overall warhead ceiling, the United States could have kept more platforms (bombers or ICBMs) in its inventory. In the end, the Soviets rejected this position and said that it would have to reopen the entire discount rule (then agreed) if the United States was serious about redefining the term, *Air-Launched Cruise Missile*.

The net effect of all the bomber discounting was that each party actually deployed about 9000 strategic nuclear weapons while attributing to themselves only 6000. Throughout the nine-year START negotiation, none of the military organizations arguing for the discount rule ever worried about the threat environment that discounting created.

Strategic ballistic missiles posed few force structure problems. The United States and Soviet Union had tested specific missiles with more reentry vehicles (RVs) than were later deployed. The Minuteman III had been tested with seven RVs, but deployed with three. The Poseidon SLBM had been tested with thirteen RVs, but deployed with ten. And the Soviets had tested one of their SLBMs with more RVs than they deployed. So, it was mutually convenient for each side to overlook such tests of unusual numbers of RVs, provided that the tests were never repeated and the testing practice stopped.

Although ballistic missile warhead accountability issues were among the easiest to resolve, overall force structure management required more flexibility than the treaty allowed. Rather late in the START negotiations, the Air Force, Strategic Air Command, and the Navy discovered that it would be very convenient from the perspective of force structure preservation to be able to download US ballistic missiles and claim lower warhead attribution numbers. Originally, the US arms control interagency opposed the idea. It was late in the game to negotiate downloading rules. It looked like a loophole or a device for cheating. It inevitably conferred breakout advantages to the Soviets, because their missiles had larger payload potential. When it was eventually presented to the Soviets, they opposed the idea vigorously, until Soviet force structure managers saw the advantages it conferred. In the end, downloading was accepted, and it is one of the most useful tools in START for force structure management.

The arms control interagency's objective of predictability also posed risks for the Air Force. The United States wanted overlapping regimes of verification, notification, and cooperative measures to provide a degree of compliance confidence unattainable through National Technical Means alone. Soviet negotiators had a low opinion of most of these except where they could be applied to heavy bombers, and there the Soviets applied them with energy. The Soviets wanted to restrict US heavy bomber operations outside US borders, restrict overseas deployments, and limit employment of US bombers on conventional missions abroad. Had the United States accepted these positions, the effect on heavy bomber operations would have been profound. The Soviets wanted advance notification of bomber deployments, heavy bombers to return to their bases when their bases were inspected, and cooperative measures following large bomber exercises or deployments. The Air Force, SAC, Joint Staff, and theater CINCs opposed such limitations. The Air Force-SAC objective was to be able to support the regional CINCs' war plans. As the 1980s drew to a close, those plans increasingly called for precision-guided heavy bomber weapons, particularly Conventional Air-Launched Cruise Missiles, a Black World program that START negotiators knew nothing about until just before Desert Storm. Exaggerated predictability measures would have undercut the utility of heavy bombers at precisely the moment when they were about to enjoy a non-nuclear renaissance.

Air Force arms control issues were among the most bitter negotiating disagreements in START. In February 1991, just a few months before treaty signature, the START Joint Draft Text contained about 150 bracketed provisions (provisions on which the two sides could not agree) down from several thousands of brackets one year earlier. Of the remaining bracketed text, virtually all were associated with heavy bombers and ALCMs. The Head of the START Delegation believed the United States had negotiating leverage to get the US position (the position of the US Air Force) accepted on only ten per cent of the bracketed provisions. Major General Gary Curtain, a former ICBM wing commander and career SAC officer, was the Representative of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the START Talks and the US Co-Chairman of the START Heavy Bomber-ALCM Working Group. He developed a strategy to dismantle the Soviet negotiating strategy on bomber-ALCM issues and gave the United States the negotiating leverage it needed. As the text was agreed, the sides adopted the US language on 60 per cent of the brackets, almost 100 provisions. START would have been a much different treaty for the Air Force had it not been for Curtain.

EVOLUTIONARY CHANGES IN DEFENSE ORGANIZATION

During the Reagan years, a significant change in defense organization occurred. Although its impact was not felt immediately, the Air Force's role in arms control eventually changed significantly. The change was the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

Goldwater-Nichols expanded the role of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the regional and functional CINCs at the expense of the Armed Services. The Joint Staff was subordinated to the Chairman for the first time. The Chairman also received more authority in resource allocation decisions. The CINCs received more responsibility for stating requirements. Prior to Goldwater-Nichols, Joint Staff deference to Service positions was automatic unless the Services could not agree among themselves. Then, the Joint Staff performed the role of honest broker. Goldwater-Nichols made the Joint Staff an independent actor and first among equals with the Service staffs. It created the foundation of a General Staff system by inventing a joint career field, establishing a credential system for it, and implying extravagant rewards for entering the joint service specialty. This occurred in 1986 during Admiral William Crowe's tenure as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Admiral Crowe chose not to impose his full statutory authority, inasmuch as he regarded himself as a transition figure. His successor, General Colin Powell, implemented Goldwater-Nichols completely.

Under General Powell, the Joint Staff began to exercise its statutory independence. Air Force positions on arms control were not often overruled, but the Chairman and his joint staff made clear in a variety of ways that new rules were in place. The full effect of these changes was not felt until the early 1990s when the Strategic Air Command was dissolved. With the elimination of the only Specified Command and its replacement with a joint command, United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), the special relationship between the Air Force and the nuclear warfighter ended. It did not end all at once, and the ghost of its former self materializes on occasion. However, the special relationship is between STRATCOM and the Joint Staff, not STRATCOM and the Air Staff.

After some initial fumbling, Strategic Air Command's assets and responsibilities were transferred to two other Air Force MAJCOMs, Air Combat Command and Space Command. Arguably, the strategic nuclear mission is foreign to each and contributes to neither command's vision of the future. Strategic Air Command's institutional identity and operational focus build over half a century had been lost, and nothing like it has emerged to replace it.

AIR FORCE ARMS CONTROL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Participants in the Air Force arms control process during the late Cold War period are understandably proud of their achievements. Universally, they contend that they achieved all the institutional objectives they were asked to secure. As a participant in the arms control process outside the Air Force during much of the period, I agree with them. Few participants in the arms control process can match the Air Force's string of arms control achievements. Why was the Air Force so successful?

Participants in the process repeatedly point to the role played by Air Force senior leadership as the most important factor in their success. Action officers and Division Chiefs in the relevant organizations frequently were surprised at how sophisticated was the senior staff's understanding of the arms control process and its impact on airpower, particularly strategic airpower. The Air Force senior staff during these years tended to have broad experience in strategic force operations, plans, programs, and studies and analysis. They also had prolonged exposure of the course of their careers with the Washington policy/legislative affairs community. As they rose to prominence in the Air Force, their careers exposed them to many of the same issues again-and-again, but from different perspectives. First, they saw it as operators, then as Air Force planners, then as programmers. Finally, they saw it as joint policymakers. It was particularly important for strategic arms control that Air Force Chiefs of Staff frequently had been the Commander-in-Chief of Strategic Air Command.

The second most important factor was the special relationship between the Air Staff arms control staff and the nuclear warfighter. The relationship was unimaginably close by today's standard. For a period of nearly 15 years, Air Staff and joint arms control positions were filled selectively by officers who had risen in responsibility and rank in Strategic Air Command. The personal and organizational connections between the Air Staff and appropriate SAC staffs cannot be overemphasized. They occurred at the personal, analytic, organizational, and command levels and bestowed a degree of trust, confidence and unity that is not duplicable today.

In this period, the Air Staff and SAC had respected analytic capabilities. Air Force Studies and Analysis had the ability to conduct quantitative analyses independent of the Joint Staff or Office of the Secretary of Defense. That analysis gave Air Staff positions considerable impact on strategic nuclear matters.

The Air Force also went to great trouble to fill influential arms control positions with outstanding Air Force colonels with strong operational and

policy backgrounds. The list includes Colonel Robert Linhard (National Security Council Staff), Colonel Michael Wheeler (Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), Colonel Richard Wallace (Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), Colonel John Eller (Joint Staff/DDIN), Colonel Philip (Tony) Foley (Office of Strategic Nuclear Affairs, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency), Colonel William (Gary) Richardson (Special Assistant to Ambassador Edward Rowny, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency), and Colonel Frank Dellerman (Deputy Director, Office of START Policy, Office of the Secretary of Defense). The practical experience and judgment of these officers helped shape issues in ways that contributed to Air Force interests.

In retrospect, the only shortcoming of this period was the failure of all Air Force personnel involved to foresee the ultimate impact of organizational change in the Department of Defense. The combined effect of Goldwater-Nichols and the creation of US Strategic Command eroded the role the Air Force was to play in arms control and nuclear matters generally. Although participants in the arms control process during the late Cold War period believed they were protecting Air Force interests with each success, they never believed it possible for the United States to contemplate nuclear reductions on today's scale. As a result, the victories on which they congratulated themselves accelerated the effects they were hoping to avoid. Yet, if this criticism is valid, it is also academic. It is not clear what the Air Force could have done to mitigate the impact of organizational change in DOD, or change in the international security environment, had they foreseen the future perfectly. In the end, the Air Force is an armed service, not an invisible government.

CONCLUSION

The influence of the Air Force in arms control reached its apex in the 1980s and early 1990s. The conditions and circumstances that allowed the Air Staff and Strategic Air Command to have such impact are now history. In all likelihood, they will never be duplicated. Gone are Strategic Air Command, its institutional identity, and its operational focus. Gone are the days in which a large number of the Air Force senior staff can claim to have risen to high position in the nuclear force. Gone is the special relationship between the Air Staff and the nuclear warfighter. Gone is the Air Staff's respected, independent analytic capability in nuclear matters. As a result of these changes, arms control may pose today an immediate institutional threat to the Air Force that it never posed before.