

*A unique involvement of
intelligence with policy-making*

STRATEGIC ARMS LIMITATION AND INTELLIGENCE

Richard Helms*

Several of my senior associates will be joining you next Monday to discuss CIA, what its role is, and how it relates to the rest of the intelligence community. In my own appearance here, I will try to give you an appreciation for our work by describing one of our major intelligence problems and how we try to cope with it in practice. I hope that our two visits will give you a full picture of what we do and persuade you, when you return to your own departments, that our efforts are worthy of your cooperation and support.

The problem I'd like to examine today is one which has been with us on and off for almost two decades. Since 1969, however, it has grown so rapidly in importance and urgency that it now is one of our foremost continuing concerns. This is the problem of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, commonly shortened to SALT.

It will be immediately obvious to you that intelligence has major roles to play in this matter. We are responsible for defining the Soviet strategic capabilities which are to be limited in any treaty. After any agreement is signed, we will be even more involved in continually monitoring whether the Soviets are observing those limits. Beyond that, the subject has a further interest for intelligence professionals. It illustrates an involvement of intelligence with policy-making which—in its thoroughness, its intensity, and its duration—is in my experience unique. All right-minded men subscribe to the theory that sound intelligence should be one of the fundamental bases of foreign policy, one of the starting points in the policy-making process. The unusual thing about SALT is that the process is truly working that way. And this leads to some problems for the intelligence officer which I will touch upon in a few moments.

Despite endless lip service from all sides, arms control has made precious little progress in this century. One of the key roadblocks has been finding a reliable way to monitor any agreement. The issue is usually referred to as that of verification, although "monitoring" is a more precise term. In brief, we have insisted that any agreement must contain built-in ways of making sure, on a continuing basis, that the Soviets are living up to it. Clearly the preferred way would be to have the right to visit and inspect any facility which we suspected was in violation. But they on their side have refused, very firmly, to permit on-site inspection of a kind we would regard as useful. And so there the matter has rested, by and large, until we could develop means which would satisfy our concerns about possible cheating without running afoul of their objections to foreign inspectors on Soviet soil. In other words, an agreement as wide-ranging as the one contemplated at SALT has had to await the advent of a reliable, repeatable means of verification from outside the USSR.

This brings me into an area in which I must tread with the greatest care. I am talking, of course, about satellite reconnaissance. Everyone knows that this activity is going on. And yet we still go to considerable lengths—and endure

*This is the text of the DCI's address to the National War College on 13 October 1971.

considerable inconvenience—to maintain a security barrier around it. There are two excellent reasons for this. One is that certain details of the program still must be kept from the Soviets if it is to remain fully effective. The second is that the Soviets themselves are very anxious that it not be discussed. They are aware of what we are doing, although not of the extent of our success, and they have a vigorous program of their own. In fact, last year* they launched about three times as many reconnaissance satellites as we did. But they have made it clear that they are unwilling to agree *explicitly* to anything which would appear to some as an infringement of territorial sovereignty, a matter on which they are extremely sensitive. So we draw no more attention than is necessary to this activity. If a treaty is finally achieved, you will find this point covered in language like “national technical means of verification, operating within the generally accepted principles of international law.” There will be no misunderstanding between Washington and Moscow about what is meant. But we’ll avoid a lot of problems by saying it that way.

Since the development of this capability has been so crucial in bringing about the possibility of a major arms control treaty, let me give you a few benchmarks in the program. We did not await the end of the U-2 flights over the USSR before starting on a successor. In the mid-1950s, not long after the propulsion breakthrough which led to the Atlas ICBM, the go-ahead was given. Working in the closest cooperation with the Air Force, we had to break new ground in a whole variety of systems and subsystems relating to propulsion, guidance, camera performance, and command and control. The first five years were full of discouragements and setbacks, and I must say that I am tremendously impressed with the courage and perseverance of my predecessors, and the ingenuity of our contractors, in their repeated trips back to the drawing board. As a result, the first full-systems success came in 1960, almost overlapping with the last U-2 flight over Soviet territory. Since then, reliability has become excellent. The performance of the system, as well as the quality of the product, has dramatically improved. It has come to embrace electronic, infrared, and other kinds of intelligence in addition to imagery. We have reached the point where we can give to the President some definite assurances about just what sort of treaty provisions we can and cannot monitor with confidence.

And may I remark that, as an old hand in an Agency which is often accused of housing inveterate Cold Warriors, I will be extremely gratified when the day comes, as I think it will, when real limits can be placed on the arms race on the basis of this work of ours.

This possibility began to take on some reality in the summer of 1968, when the United States and the USSR jointly announced their intention to begin talks on reducing both offensive and defensive strategic weapons. In the next month, however, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, and President Johnson had no possibility of taking up negotiations before he left office in the following January. This hiatus was extended when President Nixon decided that the government had not really done all its homework thoroughly, and that we were not adequately prepared for true negotiations with the USSR. Some of my people, I recall, were reluctant to accept this at the time. But when they went back over the ground in detail—and particularly when they saw the sorts of problems which actually emerged once we began talks with the Soviets in November 1969—they were frank to admit that not enough had been done.

The way in which President Nixon’s administration addressed this task has been dubbed the “building block approach.” As a method, it foresees prolonged

*In 1970.

negotiations, for which it will not suffice simply to construct a U.S. position and then try to get the Soviets to buy it. Instead, we have taken each strategic weapons system in isolation. For example, we took ICBMs or ABMs, and explored all the issues that would be involved in their limitation. This involves, in the first instance, defining what limitations we could verify unilaterally. These building blocks are then combined in various alternative models, which are examined from the standpoint, not only of overall confidence in our ability to verify, but also of the impact on the strategic posture of both sides.

It will be evident that this way of going about it involves a lot more work. We have to cover the waterfront. In the process we have studied many subjects which clearly are not going to be in any agreement reached in the foreseeable future. But at the same time we have clarified a great many uncertainties, and many of our results, though not relevant to the present phase of the talks, may well become so in the future.

When I say "we," I'm referring to a considerable mechanism which has been created to prepare for the negotiations and oversee them once they start. It will surprise none of you to learn that this is done by an inter-agency committee. This group* is chaired by Dr. Kissinger and includes Secretary Irwin from State, Secretary Packard of Defense, Admiral Moorer of the JCS, Philip Farley of ACDA, and myself for CIA. Its name is the SALT Verification Panel, which testifies to the priority given to this concern in formulating our position. Its job is to produce background studies and provide the National Security Council with a set of options from which the U.S. position is finally evolved. Naturally, it has spawned lesser bodies where the work is done, notably the Verification Working Group and the Backstopping Committee, on which all the same departments sit. These groups have been in operation for over two years now, and the end is not in sight.

This brings me to the concern which I touched upon earlier. Frankly, I am made a little uneasy when large numbers of our officers find themselves working, week after week and now year after year, as members of inter-agency groups which are heavily concerned with policy-making. Make no mistake about it, there are plenty of hot policy fights in these groups. The structure of the Executive Branch guarantees that this will be so. ACDA's mission, for example, is to prepare and negotiate arms control treaties, and they need people with a commitment to that objective if they are to do their job effectively. The Pentagon's mission is to make sure that the nation is militarily as secure as it can be, and this encourages a different perspective. In some ways it is an adversary system, and the hope is that out of it shall come one final position which best satisfies all the elements, not just of the bureaucracy, but of the national interest.

But when departmental missions lead to something with elements of an adversary system, CIA is definitely *not* meant to be one of those elements. The Agency as an institution is neither "for" nor "against" an arms control treaty. I make sure that all our officers understand that they are not to involve themselves in this kind of position-taking, which lies outside the purview of intelligence. It is absolutely crucial for us that none of the policy-making departments should have any reason to doubt the objectivity of the intelligence input. There must never be any grounds for suspicion that intelligence is bending its conclusions to suit some policy preference. If we ever lose our reputation for honesty in this matter, we lose all our usefulness along with it.

*As of October 1971.

I said a minute ago that I had some uneasiness on this score. It is not because anyone has ever challenged our objectivity, or hinted at suspicions about it. But this long and intense involvement with policy makers is unusual for us, and I simply feel obliged to worry that one or another of our people will get so deeply embroiled in the *intelligence* angles of some particular controversy that he will forget himself and step over the line into the *policy* aspects of the fight. It is a matter of maintaining professional discipline against the inherent temptations of human nature. I am confident that we have stayed clean so far, and I mean to ensure that we continue to stay clean.

Let me give an example. The Soviets have a defensive missile system which we label the SA-5. Everyone agrees that it is an effective system against aircraft. Some believe that it has capabilities against ballistic missiles too, or that it could be upgraded to acquire such capabilities. Obviously, this has a lot to do with the U.S. position on ABM limits. If the SA-5 has no real value or potential in the ABM role, we need not worry about it in drafting limits on ABM systems. If it does, then ABM limits must be accompanied by some kind of controls on the SA-5.

Clearly, we have a major input to make, as an intelligence agency, on the facts of the matter. It is also clear to us that it is natural for the policy-making departments to divide on this issue—according to their hopes and fears—and to derive conflicting recommendations about the U.S. negotiating position from it. We cannot remain innocently ignorant of these implications. What we can do is remain steadfastly indifferent to them, stick to the facts, share the facts and our reasoning about them with all concerned, give our best judgment, and leave the policy decision to others.

There is one area of policy, however, in which CIA has an inescapable responsibility. That is in reaching a finding of whether a given limitation can be monitored by our own means. CIA does not reach these findings unilaterally, but rather in conjunction with our brother departments sitting on the Verification Panel. But this matter is our special competence as intelligence officers, and our view carries corresponding weight. As to whether a given limitation is *desirable*—whether it advances U.S. interests—we let the others argue about that. But we expect to be held responsible by the President for monitoring any agreement which is reached. So we want to be very sure that the agreement is clear and precise about what is limited, that it is restricted to those areas in which we can subsequently supply assurances that the USSR is complying—or conversely that we can testify definitely to any violation.

Some examples may give a clearer idea of the factors involved here. At one end of the spectrum, we have good capabilities for observing large distinctive objects. That is to say, we can count ICBM silos and launch pads. We can count aircraft. So we can monitor an agreement which provides that thou shalt not deploy more than a stated number of these items. It would be tougher, by the way, but probably not impossible, to monitor an agreement requiring reductions in these categories.

At the other end of the range is the problem of controlling, say, what's inside an object. MIRV is the famous example. No one has yet figured out a way to determine, from 100 miles up, how many individual warheads may be inside the re-entry vehicle on top of a Soviet ICBM. We cannot precisely verify a warhead's nuclear yield, nor its accuracy, although we think our estimates are not far off. In general, the area of qualitative factors—what are called performance characteristics—is very much more difficult to monitor. It is not altogether impossible to bring these factors within the scope of an arms control agreement. But to do so would require something quite drastic. It might include a ban on all flight

testing which would freeze the state of the art at its present level. And the Soviets, who see themselves as behind in several of these areas, have made it clear that they are not now prepared to give up testing.

In between, there are a lot of problem cases. Mobile ICBMs are a case in point. After a lot of study, we have concluded that, should the USSR embark on such a program, we could detect that they had done so. And we could get some broad fix on its size. But this fix would be nothing like the precision we can obtain on fixed land-based missiles. So the verification study on this weapon system leads to the conclusion that we can either allow it within an over-all numerical total, and accept a considerable area of uncertainty about compliance, or ban it altogether. A further conclusion is that a total ban is verifiable, because there would be little point in the USSR jeopardizing the whole agreement with small violations, and we could detect large, strategically significant cheating. And lastly in cases like this we also have to supply a well-based estimate of *how soon*, after the Soviets began a forbidden program, we could catch them at it. In the case of mobile systems, our estimate is it would take us as long as a year or so.

This kind of consideration has led us into another area of work which we didn't foresee, the writing of military definitions. It's easy enough for everyone in Washington to agree that SALT should cover, for example, strategic bombers. And so that problem is solved until some smart fellow comes along and says, all right, what is a strategic bomber? Is it defined by its size? Its weight? What about range? and when that comes up, one wants to know: range from what starting point? These things finally get sorted out, and then one comes up against the Soviets and *their* definitions. Naturally, it turns out that each side has framed its definitions in ways which embrace as much of the other fellow's forces as possible, while exempting as much of his own as he can. And there are plenty of differences in force structure which leave room for this sort of game-playing. So we find ourselves in the unexpected position of composing a glossary of terms, a process which is next door to drafting treaty language. This is an uncommon role for intelligence officers, but our knowledge of Soviet weapon systems makes us natural contributors to this effort.

As veterans of the Washington bureaucracy, you will all assume, and correctly, that SALT has consumed a good many man-hours and generated quite a bit of paper. The bookshelf in our SALT vault is now over six feet long, and our commitment of personnel since January 1969 is pushing toward 100 man-years.* Obviously, the priority of the task means that we have had to devote our top-quality officers to it. Within CIA, I have chosen not to set up a large permanent mechanism for this job, on the grounds that SALT will probably be with us for a long time and has to be integrated into our regular commitments. We do have a small full-time staff of four officers, but beyond this we have made SALT a continuing priority concern of our most able people.

We also send a three-man team to the talks themselves in Helsinki and Vienna. This group provides on-the-spot expertise on verification problems and on current developments in Soviet strategic forces. It also extends intelligence support and general assistance to Ambassador Smith and the delegation. Our chief adviser at the talks is a senior Agency expert, but in keeping with the distinction between intelligence and policy-making, he is not a delegate.

One of the useful aspects of the talks is the opportunity they provide to engage a number of Soviet officials directly, on formal and informal levels, in a continuing dialogue on strategic matters. As one would expect, they practice good security. None of them has let drop any top secrets. But these contacts have

*As of October 1971.

served to clarify or confirm a few general propositions about the Soviets. For one thing, it is clear that the two countries do share a common body of strategic concepts. When we talk with them about deterrence, first and second strikes, and so on, we discover that the implications of nuclear technology have impressed themselves on the two sides in fairly similar ways. It is also clear that Moscow keeps the Soviet delegation on a very tight rein, which is consistent with our picture of how that bureaucracy works. We have also been treated to illustrations of how far the Soviets carry the concept of security compartmentation. Their delegation is very unevenly informed. They have confessed that only a few of them are privy to facts about Soviet systems and programs which are well known to the entire American delegation. On the day in which Ambassador Smith set forth some details about Soviet ICBMs, eyebrows shot up on the other side of the table, and notes were busily taken.

This sort of compartmentalization is something we're quite familiar with from our work against the Soviet target. It has the sad consequence for us that almost any Soviet source we acquire will have less knowledgeability than his American official counterpart. This brings up the question of how human sources fit into our plans for monitoring a SALT agreement. There is far too big an element of luck in the agent business for me to promise the President that he can rely upon agents as an important means of verification. At the same time, however, when one turns the problem around, the Soviets can never be entirely sure that we don't have an agent placed so that he could report on cheating. And this, I think, will serve to reinforce the inhibitions upon Soviet deceit.

Cheating is of course the key problem for us—for the U.S. Government and particularly for CIA. If I could just sum up how I see it at the moment:

The United States is determined not to agree to any limitations which it cannot, with real confidence, monitor unilaterally.

The Soviets do not fight us on this. They acknowledge that any agreement would lose its validity if either side lost this ability to verify.

We now have a pretty clear picture of what we can and cannot verify, that is, of what is eligible and ineligible for inclusion in a treaty.

Presumably the Soviet Union will not sign any treaty which does not conform to its interests, and therefore it will have an interest in keeping it in force. Cheating would have a high risk of detection, and getting caught would be a major political setback which—they would have to recognize—might very well set off a new arms push by the United States.

But one cannot eliminate all the unknowns forever in a world of rapid technological change. With both sides continuing—perhaps even accelerating—their research and development, new weapons—or important variations in old ones—are bound to come along. In thinking about this, it has become clear that one cannot write an arms limitation treaty now, one which can be unilaterally verified, which will cover weapon systems which have yet to be invented. What about an ABM system, for example, based on lasers? I cannot promise to monitor a ban on such a system until you can tell me what it looks like.

There are two answers to this. The first, in the SALT context, is to recognize the problem, not to try to write a treaty that will stand up forever, but to make provision for a continuing dialogue, even a continuing negotiation, which can try to grapple with new technological developments as they occur. In fact, what the two delegations are seeking now is a very limited agreement, covering only a few systems, with the stated intention of proceeding on to a wider treaty later. This approach lays the groundwork for a further extension, embracing new

systems, which do not fit the categories of the initial treaty. Without such an extension, it is hard to imagine that a strategic arms treaty could remain viable for very many years, without the security of one side or the other being undermined by technological change.

The second answer, in the intelligence context, is to direct our future efforts even more vigorously toward the problem of new Soviet weapons. This means trying to anticipate them, to spot them, and to develop a capability to monitor them closely enough, and in time, to meet treaty standards. Up to now, our job has been the filling of intelligence gaps, and the tools developed for this task have turned out to have major additional benefits in the verification field. In the future, we have to consider verification as a priority in and of itself, and to look for collection techniques tailored to this particular task. We will also find that the frequency of intelligence coverage will be determined more by the requirement to monitor an agreement than by the need to fill traditional gaps. This will mean that coverage has to be regular, reliable, and I suspect, at times, more frequent than we would otherwise need.

One last point on the future. The SALT proceedings envision that, as part of any agreement, a Standing Commission would be created. In this commission, either side could raise questions about the other side's compliance. The other side could then provide explanations if it wished. This would be a sort of bilateral Verification Panel, if you will, and I would expect that our Agency would have a great deal to do with its work. In broader terms, such a Commission will be a good test of how well the two sides can get along in maintaining a stable strategic arrangement. If it works well, this will doubtless increase the chances for wider agreements in the future. But if the Soviets prove uncooperative here, we will have to think harder about entering into broader obligations with them.

Let me end on the note with which I began. This is rather new work for intelligence officers. It is immensely challenging, and has brought us into new involvements. I know that I have had to learn a great deal; I can now hold my own in a discussion of laser technology—for the first thirty seconds. It has forced us to learn how to stay very closely engaged with the policy makers, without sliding over into policy-making ourselves. It will be with us for a long time to come, and it will be constantly changing. I think we do it well, and I mean to make sure that we do it even better in the future.

In a larger sense, these are the goals we try to reach in all our work. Specific cases vary enormously. But in all of them we strive constantly to be relevant to the needs of the policy maker. We strive to be objective, to make the most of our unique advantage among Washington bureaucracies—the advantage of not being responsible for making policy. These two qualities—relevance and objectivity—are the core of what we mean by professionalism in the intelligence business. To the extent that we serve these principles, we believe we serve the Republic.