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The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities

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Executive Summary

In recent years, the return of great power competition, increasingly explicit Russian nuclear threats to the United States and allies, renewed attention and debate on the planned modernization of U.S. strategic nuclear forces, the perceived erosion of arms control constraints, mounting international instability, and a general deterioration in the global strategic environment have all given rise to concerns that a new arms race is in the offing, initiated, propelled and accelerated by the United States. This *Occasional Paper* addresses the issue in historical context.

An enduring theme in the critique of U.S. strategic acquisition programs is that U.S. programs instigate an action-reaction arms race dynamic. For decades, the argument against U.S. nuclear modernization and missile defense programs that has followed from this theme is that if the United States would exercise restraint in its modernization programs, so too would other nuclear powers. The contention here, of course, is that U.S. nuclear weapons and missile defense activities instigate others to pursue or expand their own nuclear programs. Thus, if the United States refrains from modernizing its nuclear forces and building or expanding its missile defense capabilities, others will do likewise—thereby bringing an arms race to an end or stopping it before it begins.

Critics of U.S. strategic offensive and defensive programs have leveled this charge against U.S. modernization efforts and offered this prescription for ending an arms race since the early 1960s. Opponents of the current U.S. strategic modernization program continue to emphasize this action-reaction narrative. This narrative is relatively uncontested in popular commentary because,

with few exceptions, there is little careful discussion of the pertinent history of U.S.-Soviet Cold War interactions or post-Cold War dynamics.

In the absence of an accurate understanding of the relationship between adversary developments and the evolution of U.S. nuclear and missile defense policy and strategy, a dominant notion remains widespread that the Cold War was a period of "mindless" arms racing—driven by a U.S.-led action-reaction cycle. This characterization of U.S. policy and behavior endures despite overwhelming empirical data to the contrary. The belief that U.S. actions are the primary instigators of arms races is again evident in the expressed opposition to the contemporary U.S. nuclear modernization program initiated by the Obama Administration and sustained by the Trump Administration. The corollary to this thinking, as expressed in the public debate, is that if only the United States would refrain from taking actions in the nuclear and missile defense spheres its restraint would be reciprocated by others. Extensive research, however, uncovered virtually no empirical evidence to suggest that this "inaction-inaction" corollary to the action-reaction thesis is valid.

In many cases, developments in foreign nuclear policies and postures led U.S. policymakers to re-examine American nuclear policies and capabilities in an effort to preserve the credible functioning of deterrence, including extended deterrence. Other cases, including the Reagan SDI program and the subsequent U.S. deployment of limited homeland defense capabilities, reflected attempted revisions in U.S. policy priorities or a response to changes in threats to the United States.

Major changes, or inflection points, in U.S. policy from the end of the 1960s to the present day were accompanied by assertions that U.S. actions would start an arms race and make the world more dangerous, and that if the United States refrained from taking actions, i.e., inaction, others

would follow suit. However, neither prediction is consistent with the historical evidence.

The United States has not been the first cause driver of an arms race, nor has U.S. restraint in nuclear developments been matched by others. The popular narrative of an action-reaction arms race dynamic led by the United States lacks integrity, yet it continues to be voiced without restraint as if it is a “law” of international relations. In some cases, U.S. action or inaction was followed by adversary behavior that was precisely the opposite of what proponents of the action-reaction theory of arms racing predicted, including U.S. action that led to Soviet inaction, and U.S. inaction that led to Soviet action.

Clearly, there have been interactions in U.S and Soviet (and subsequently, Russian) armament programs. Yet, in no case does it appear that the United States has been the lead cause of an action-reaction arms race. The United States has focused on preserving its capacity for deterrence and extended deterrence in the face of rapidly expanding Soviet and more recently Russian strategic nuclear capabilities, theater nuclear, and conventional capabilities, and an aggressive, expansionist, anti-American foreign policy.

Moreover, implicit in the U.S.-led action-reaction arms race theory is an assumption that other governments are either unwilling or incapable of deciding for themselves what their own national security requires, and simply react to U.S. developments. The belief that the United States sets the scope, pace, and direction of others’ armament activities, and that the power of U.S. strategic restraint will guide others similarly, reflects a form of cultural arrogance that is unsupported by the historical record.

As the issue of U.S. nuclear policy and programs continues to generate controversy, it is important to ensure that the public debate is informed by facts and data, not politically driven speculation and posturing. Hopefully,

this *Occasional Paper* will contribute to the understanding of those who seek a discussion of nuclear weapons policies and programs, informed by the lessons of history. We owe this to ourselves and to future generations that are unlikely to step out of the nuclear shadow.

Introduction

In recent years, multiple factors have given rise to concerns that a new arms race is in the offing, initiated, propelled and accelerated by the United States. These include: the return of great power competition; increasingly explicit Russian nuclear threats to the United States and allies; renewed attention and debate on the planned modernization of U.S. strategic nuclear forces; the perceived erosion of arms control constraints; mounting international instability; and, a general deterioration in the global strategic environment. This *Occasional Paper* addresses the issues of arms racing and the U.S. role as instigator or responder in historical context.

An enduring theme in the critique of U.S. strategic acquisition programs is that U.S. programs instigate an action-reaction arms race dynamic. For decades, the argument against U.S. nuclear modernization and missile defense programs that has followed from this theme is that if the United States would exercise restraint in its modernization programs, so too would other nuclear powers. The contention here, of course, is that U.S. nuclear weapons and missile defense activities instigate others to pursue or expand their own nuclear programs. Thus, if the United States refrains from modernizing its nuclear forces and building or expanding its missile defense capabilities, others will do likewise—thereby bringing an arms race to an end or stopping it before it begins.

Critics of U.S. strategic offensive and defensive programs have leveled this charge against U.S. modernization efforts and offered this prescription for ending an arms race since the early 1960s. Opponents of the current U.S. strategic modernization program continue to emphasize this action-reaction narrative. This narrative is

relatively uncontested in popular commentary because, with few exceptions, there is little careful discussion of the history of the pertinent U.S.-Soviet Cold War interactions or post-Cold War dynamics.

For nearly three decades, there has been a steady decline in U.S. expertise in the analysis of strategic deterrence and nuclear forces issues.¹ This decline corresponds to the general U.S. post-Cold War perception of relatively benign relations with both Russia and China, and the related dwindling concern over nuclear policy and a failure to appreciate the enduring relevance of nuclear forces. However, with the renewed emphasis on great power competition and current U.S. plans to modernize all elements of its strategic nuclear deterrent, the notion that U.S. actions will initiate another spiral in a nuclear arms race has again become a common refrain among those who lack an understanding of or choose to ignore the historical and contemporary linkages between adversary actions and U.S. responses. Consequently, setting the record straight is of critical importance.

In the absence of an accurate understanding of the relationship between adversary developments and the evolution of U.S. nuclear and missile defense policy and strategy, a dominant notion remains widespread that the Cold War was a period of “mindless” arms racing – driven by a U.S.-led action-reaction cycle.² This characterization of

¹ “...the lack of interest in and attention to the nuclear mission and nuclear deterrence...have been widespread throughout DoD and contributed to the decline of attention in the Air Force.” See, Department of Defense, *Report of the Secretary of Defense on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management, Phase II: Review of the DoD Nuclear Mission*, December 2008, p. iii, available at <https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/PhaseIIReportFinal.pdf>.

² This characterization of U.S. behavior began relatively early in the Cold War. See for example, Jeremy Stone, *Containing the Arms Race*:

U.S. policy and behavior endures despite overwhelming empirical data to the contrary. The belief that U.S. actions are the primary instigators of arms races is again evident in the expressed opposition to the contemporary U.S. nuclear modernization program initiated by the Obama Administration and sustained by the Trump Administration. As some critics have asserted, "The parties are caught up in an action-reaction cycle that significantly increases the risks of escalation.... [U.S.] surplus forces... provide incentives and possible justification for potential U.S. adversaries to maintain unnecessarily large nuclear forces of their own, a self-perpetuating dynamic that fuels nuclear arms competition."³ This critique of U.S. nuclear posture is now also applied to U.S. relations with North Korea.⁴

This *Occasional Paper* is based on a detailed, 2020 study that addresses the lack of understanding of strategic deterrence, nuclear force issues and history that has led to a resurgent belief in a contemporary action-reaction arms

Some Specific Proposals (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), pp. 16-17, 22-23; George Rathjens, "The Dynamics of the Arms Race," in *Arms Control: Readings From Scientific American* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co., 1973), pp. 177-187; Herbert York, *Race to Oblivion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 234; and, Robert McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 58-67.

³ See for example, Bruce G. Blair, Jessica Sleight and Emma Claire Foley, *The End of Nuclear Warfighting: Moving to a Deterrence-Only Posture* (Washington, D.C.: September 2018), pp. 9, 33.

⁴ Ankit Panda, "New U.S. Missiles in Asia Could Increase the North Korean Nuclear Threat," *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2019, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/14/us-missiles-asia-inf-north-korea-nuclear-threat-grow/>.

race dynamic.⁵ It identifies and analyzes the evolution of, and changes to, U.S. nuclear policy and strategy and the variety of factors that led to those changes—from the late 1960’s to the present. By identifying the major inflection points in U.S. policy and strategy and the reasons behind them, this *Occasional Paper* empirically challenges the narrative of a U.S.-led action-reaction arms race and helps to fill the knowledge gap that often leads to such mischaracterizations. It also helps today’s interested public and policymakers understand the many factors actually driving U.S. policy and programs. A cogent, well-researched testing of the “mindless arms race” critique is critical to an understanding of the long-term implications of the nuclear modernization programs supported by the Obama and Trump Administrations.

Importantly, this *Occasional Paper* is not advancing the hypothesis that there was no arms interaction between the United States and the Soviet Union, nor that there is no U.S.-Russian interaction today. After all, it is not unreasonable to assume that a rational U.S. adversary will consider U.S. military capabilities in any relative assessment of comparative strength, whether it be for deterrence or arms acquisition purposes. Similarly, the United States would be foolish not to consider an adversary’s military programs in its own defense planning. The focus of this paper pertains to the types of interaction that have taken place and the way that interaction has been described in the public debate at the time when significant nuclear and missile defense programs were discussed. The contention here is that the description of this interaction as a *U.S.-led* action-reaction

⁵ David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith Payne, *The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2021).

arms race is a significant mischaracterization of the actual interaction that has taken place over decades. In fact, in many cases U.S. *inaction* has prompted adversary responsive reactions and U.S. moves have been prompted by prior adversary initiatives.

In general, the action-reaction arms race thesis suggests that the actions taken by the United States in the area of nuclear and missile defense policy and programs were the primary motivator for reactions on the part of the Soviet Union/Russia that proved dangerous and destabilizing—leading to a decrease in the security of each and to a significant waste of resources. The corollary to this thinking, as expressed in the public debate, is that if only the United States had refrained from taking actions in the nuclear and missile defense spheres its restraint would have been reciprocated by others. Extensive research uncovered virtually no empirical evidence to suggest that this “inaction-inaction” corollary to the action-reaction thesis is valid. Former senior Defense Department and White House official Franklin Miller stated that “this whole notion that if only we exercise restraint, so too will the Russians, is built on a completely false premise that the Russians react to us.” He called this notion “absurd,” noting, for example, that the U.S. move to de-MIRV its ICBM force did not lead the Soviets to do the same.⁶ In fact, many of the participants who agreed to be interviewed as part of an “oral history” cited the statement of former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to argue that Soviet developments were not merely a reaction to U.S. actions: “Soviet spending has shown no

⁶ Telephone interview conducted on May 15, 2020.

response to U.S. restraint—when we build, they build; when we cut, they build.”⁷

Other official and unofficial studies and reports have analyzed the action-reaction metaphor and found it to be incomplete or inaccurate in describing the historical strategic relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. For example, as Richard B. Foster of the Stanford Research Institute noted:

There has, in the past, been only a vaguely discernible correlation between changes in U.S. and Soviet defense expenditures and allocations within the annual military budgets. This has been especially true for supposed changes in corresponding parts of the United States budget. Some new defense expenditures on specific items by one power have provoked no reaction at all from the other. Others have provoked a quite irrelevant

⁷ Testimony of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown before the U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on the Budget, *Outlook and Budget Levels for Fiscal Years 1979 and 1980: Hearings Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on the Budget*, 96th Congress, 1st Session, Part 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 500, available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=8N9FAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA500&lpg=PA500&dq=%22Soviet+spending+has+shown+no+response+to+U.S.+restraint%E2%80%94when+we+build,+they+build;+when+we+cut,+they+build%22&source=bl&ots=b3gm6YekKu&sig=ACfU3U3Kl3rVtkNM9V8UzwNYhDj3Fk4e4g&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiOscDnzfHvAhVjD1kFHcssBn0Q6AEwAXoECAIQAw#v=onepage&q=%22Soviet%20spending%20has%20shown%20no%20response%20to%20U.S.%20restraint%E2%80%94when%20we%20build%2C%20they%20build%3B%20when%20we%20cut%2C%20they%20build%22&f=false>.

reaction—not a direct counter to the adversary’s reaction but an imitation of it.⁸

Soviet expenditures cannot be related to a reaction to U.S. outlays, except for the possibility that the sharply *increasing* Soviet expenditures for strategic forces (now \$16-18 billion per year) are a reaction to *decreasing* U.S. expenditures for the same programs (now \$8-9 billion per year).⁹ (emphasis in original)

Moreover, a 1995 study conducted for the Department of Defense’s Office of Net Assessment concluded that while the Soviets responded to “qualitative technological advances” on the U.S. side, their “quantitative arms buildup was driven primarily by the internal dynamic and needs of the vast civilian-dominated defense-industrial establishment, where stability and continuity of production were imperative.”¹⁰ A more recent study concluded, “The ‘action-reaction’ model of the arms competition failed to account for Soviet behavior because it disregarded the autonomy of Soviet decision-making.”¹¹ And a

⁸ Richard B. Foster, *The Impact of Ballistic Missile Defense on Arms Race Prospects*, SSC-RM-ISR-1 (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford Research Institute, 1965), p. 2.

⁹ Richard B. Foster, “The Safeguard BMD and Arms Control Prospects for the 1970s,” in William R. Kintner, ed., *Safeguard: Why the ABM Makes Sense* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969), p. 248.

¹⁰ John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Shull, *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, Vol. 1, September 22, 1995, p. 7, available at <http://russianforces.org/files/Soviet%20Intentions%201965-1985%20Vol.%201.pdf>.

¹¹ David S. Yost, “Strategic Stability in the Cold War: Lessons for Continuing Challenges,” *Proliferation Papers*, No. 36, Winter 2011, p. 24, available at <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp36yost.pdf>.

comprehensive analysis of the U.S.-Soviet strategic competition concluded:

The facts will not support the proposition that either the Soviet Union or the United States developed strategic forces only in direct immediate reaction to each other.... The facts and the historical circumstances in which they occurred testify to complex patterns of mutual influence.... No sweeping generalizations about action-reaction cycles or inexorable Soviet designs or the momentum of science and technology can survive detailed examination of the sequence of events.¹²

Numerous former U.S. government officials interviewed for this project also challenged the action-reaction arms race metaphor, with some referring to it as "deeply flawed" and "foolish." Amb. Ronald Lehman, former Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, called it "hyper-simplistic."¹³ Several who served in both Republican and Democratic administrations argued that the narrative "doesn't hold water" historically and "doesn't stand up to the facts." Amb. Robert Joseph, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security in the George W. Bush Administration, referred to it as "an article of faith" within the arms control community

¹² Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, Thomas W. Wolfe, and Alfred Goldberg, *History of the Strategic Arms Competition 1945-1972, Part II*, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office, March 1981, pp. 810-811, available at <http://documents.theblackvault.com/documents/dod/readingroom/10/227.pdf>.

¹³ Telephone interview conducted on April 29, 2020.

that is both “faulty” and “inimical to U.S. security.”¹⁴ Dr. John Harvey, Principal Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Chemical and Biological Defense Programs in the Obama Administration, stated the United States “is not a stimulator of the arms race” and called assertions to the contrary “blatant fabrications.” He noted that the U.S.-led action-reaction narrative is a “mantra” for the anti-nuclear community that has “not one ounce of credibility” and that there is “not one piece of evidence” to support it.¹⁵ He also characterized as erroneous the action-reaction argument that India’s decision not to adopt a “no first use” policy regarding nuclear weapons was driven by the U.S. decision not to do so.¹⁶

Other oral history interviewees likewise criticized the action-reaction narrative as historically inaccurate. The notion that both sides were engaged in a “mindless, spiraling, action-reaction arms race” arms race was criticized by Richard Perle, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy in the Reagan Administration, as “equally wrong and pernicious.”¹⁷

There was, however, general agreement that arms interaction between the United States and the Soviet Union took place, but not in a way that critics use the action-reaction metaphor to argue against U.S. strategic programs. Instead, the type of interactions that were particularly

¹⁴ Telephone interview conducted on May 7, 2020.

¹⁵ Telephone interview conducted on May 27, 2020.

¹⁶ For example, Scott Sagan has written that the U.S. unwillingness to forswear the use of nuclear weapons first “has influenced other states, such as India, to adopt a similar nuclear doctrine.” Scott D. Sagan, “The Case for No First Use,” *Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 3, June-July 2009, p. 170, available at <https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/the-case-for-no-first-use-sagan.pdf>.

¹⁷ Telephone interview conducted on May 14, 2020.

apparent were U.S. efforts to preserve its deterrent capacity in the face of a long-term, massive Soviet military buildup and an increasingly aggressive and hostile Soviet foreign policy supported by that buildup. In fact, Soviet leaders emphasized the nexus between the Soviet strategic nuclear buildup and increasingly aggressive Soviet geopolitical actions in the 1970s.¹⁸

There are several other important corollaries to the action-reaction thesis. For example, it is possible that U.S. actions forestalled, or precluded actions taken by others. This "action-inaction" dynamic appears to have operated in several cases during the time period covered by the study. For example, by responding to the Soviet deployment of SS-20 ballistic missiles targeted against Europe with deployment of ground-based Pershing II ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, the United States was able not only to halt the buildup of Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces but to enable the complete elimination of these systems through negotiation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. In addition, there is evidence of an "inaction-action" dynamic, whereby U.S. nuclear restraint actually *encouraged* others to take actions considered dangerous and destabilizing, such as when the United States limited its ICBM deployments, creating an incentive for the Soviet Union to expand its own capability to place U.S. ICBMs at risk. As Richard Perle noted, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's decision to freeze the number of U.S. Minuteman ICBM silos at 1,000 "presented the Soviets with an opportunity to design their force to contend with a limited number" of U.S. ICBMs and "helped to fuel

¹⁸ Keith B. Payne, *Nuclear Deterrence in US-Soviet Relations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 79-122.

the Soviet buildup.”¹⁹ Other examples, cogently articulated by Albert Wohlstetter in his seminal 1974 article, “Is There A Strategic Arms Race?,”²⁰ famously demonstrated the inapplicability of the simplistic action-reaction arms race narrative, as it has been used in the public debate, to strategic developments on both sides.

The Role of Arms Control

Another factor in assessing the veracity of the action-reaction paradigm revolves around the U.S. experience with arms control. The United States, and the West in general, has traditionally looked to arms control agreements as a way of managing strategic competition and preventing or forestalling an arms race. Arms control was considered not only an effective way to bound the quantitative growth of adversary capabilities, but also to provide transparency and predictability into the strategic relationship between the United States and Soviet Union/Russia. As one former nuclear arms control negotiator has stated, “Nuclear arms control is the only way that we can attain stable and predictable deployments of these most fearsome weapons, and it is the only way that we can assure that we won’t be bankrupted by nuclear arms racing.”²¹

Despite this general belief in the efficacy of nuclear arms control as a means of ensuring stability, transparency, and

¹⁹ Telephone interview conducted on May 14, 2020.

²⁰ Albert Wohlstetter, “Is There a Strategic Arms Race?,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 15, Summer 1974, pp. 3–20, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/1147927>.

²¹ Rose Gottemoeller, “U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Negotiations – A Short History,” *The Foreign Service Journal*, May 2020, p. 26, available at <http://www.afsa.org/sites/default/files/may2020fsj.pdf>.

predictability in the strategic relationship, most of the former senior U.S. government officials interviewed for this project challenged this view. Only a handful of arms control agreements were cited as positive and useful, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the INF Treaty, and the START I agreement. Amb. Robert Joseph, Amb. Ronald Lehman, and Franklin Miller, who served in multiple Republican and Democrat administrations, expressed the view that the START II Treaty could have been beneficial for U.S. security had it entered into force because it would have eliminated Russia’s MIRVed ICBM force.²²

Though some participants expressed support for arms control as a means of communication to reduce misperceptions and the risk of conflict, others saw arms control as a tactic used by the Soviet Union and now Russia to constrain U.S. nuclear forces and capabilities unilaterally while leaving Soviet/Russian nuclear forces relatively unconstrained. Moreover, there was a general sense that the Soviets and Russians violated those agreements that they did not believe served their interests, and that repeated U.S. failure to respond robustly to those violations – by both Republican and Democrat administrations – encouraged additional cheating. John Harvey argued that arms control can help “assure” allies, maintain domestic political support for necessary modernization programs (a point also raised by Obama Administration arms control official Frank Rose), and make a “modest contribution” to U.S. security “if the agreement is being complied with.” He stated that “arms control has always been the thing you can discuss with the

²² Telephone interviews conducted on April 29, May 7, and May 15, 2020.

Russians when you can't discuss anything else."²³ Richard Perle commented that arms control actually helped contribute to a destabilizing Soviet arms *buildup* by encouraging the Soviet Union to channel resources into the types of strategic offensive systems that were not accounted for or limited by treaty.²⁴ Similarly, Amb. Ronald Lehman noted that the Soviet deployment of SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the European theater was "an easy way to modify an ICBM and have something that was a grey area system that would escape coverage. So, here's a case where arms control had at least some role in encouraging a grey area development."²⁵

Today, there are familiar action-reaction derived arguments expressed by critics of the Obama and Trump Administrations' nuclear modernization programs—that they will start yet another spiral in the arms race. For example, one critic noted, "The United States claims that its programs are a response to nuclear developments in Russia, but our actions motivate further weapons building on their side, as the action-reaction cycle of nuclear arming spins onward in a replay of the Cold War."²⁶ Another critic stated that U.S. moves to develop more exotic weaponry "will no doubt hasten similar moves by Moscow and Beijing..."²⁷

²³ Telephone interview conducted on May 27, 2020.

²⁴ Telephone interview conducted on May 14, 2020.

²⁵ Telephone interview conducted on April 29, 2020.

²⁶ David Cortright, "Pope Francis and the U.S. bishops are correct: We cannot engage in a new nuclear arms race," *America: The Jesuit Review*, April 16, 2020, available at <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/04/16/pope-francis-and-us-bishops-are-correct-we-cannot-engage-new-nuclear>.

²⁷ Michael T. Klare, "Now Is Not the Time to Start an Arms Race," *The Nation*, March 31, 2020, available at

Russia and China supposedly will now “fear” U.S. plans “and so feel pressured to spend massive amounts on new or upgraded nuclear and non-nuclear weapons of their own”²⁸ –as if Russia and China were not pursuing significant nuclear buildups well before the Obama Administration’s nuclear rebuilding program.

Critics of current U.S. policy also assert a contemporary version of the inaction-inaction argument—if the United States sustains the existing strategic arms control regime and process, there will be no arms race, i.e., if the United States commits to restraint via arms control (including extending New START), an arms race will be avoided. However, if the United States does not preserve existing arms control agreements, “the door to an ever-more dangerous and costly global nuclear arms race will swing wide open.”²⁹ In each case, the action-reaction charge and its corollary inaction-inaction argument, the presumption is that the United States takes the lead and that it is U.S. behavior that determines the behavior of others for good or ill. This presumption essentially ignores the possibility that opponent behavior can be shaped by internal goals autonomous of and contrary to U.S. actions, and that those goals may be incompatible with U.S. national security interests and objectives.

Despite these expressed concerns, this *Occasional Paper* demonstrates that, with limited exceptions, the historical record does not support the U.S.-led action-reaction

<https://www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-cold-war-race/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Daryl G. Kimball, “Nuclear Arms Control, or a New Arms Race? Trump Seems Bent on the Latter,” *Just Security*, May 27, 2020, available at <https://www.justsecurity.org/70407/nuclear-arms-control-or-a-new-arms-race-trump-seems-bent-on-the-latter/>.

metaphor as used to argue against U.S. strategic programs or its corollary inaction-inaction assertion. Indeed, it appears that some arms control agreements have actually contributed to a channeling of adversary investments into nuclear capabilities that left the United States more vulnerable and less secure than was hoped. For example, based on the comments of Col. Gen. Nikolai Detinov, a Soviet defense ministry official with significant responsibility for Soviet arms control positions, LTG William Odom, a former Director of the National Security Agency, observed that, "the ABM Treaty appeared to have allowed a considerably larger number of offensive nuclear weapons in the Soviet arsenal than there would have been without it."³⁰ A well-regarded academic similarly noted, "By relieving the Soviets of a resource dilemma, the ABM Treaty allowed them to invest more in other capabilities, including ICBMs."³¹ *This was precisely the opposite effect* that Henry Kissinger had predicted when he testified, "By setting a limit to ABM defenses, the [ABM] [T]reaty not only eliminates one area of dangerous defensive competition, but it reduces the incentive for continuing deployment of offensive systems. As long as it lasts, offensive missile forces have, in effect, a free ride to their targets."³²

³⁰ William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 71.

³¹ Yost, "Strategic Stability in the Cold War," op. cit., p. 22.

³² Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Military Implications of the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems and the Interim Agreement on Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms*, 92 Cong., 2d sess., 1972, p. 121 (statement by Henry Kissinger).

Study Methodology

The study on which this *Occasional Paper* is based examined numerous primary, open source documents regarding the development of U.S. strategic policy. These include now-declassified governmental and unclassified non-governmental documents and books that have closely examined specific periods within this time span. In addition, the study moved beyond reliance on existing open source and declassified documents and draws on interviews with key former officials and knowledgeable academics, including more than a dozen former senior-level officials from both Democratic and Republican administrations. This unique body of "oral history" significantly contributes to an understanding of these critical issues as they unfolded over time.

Critics of the current U.S. modernization program often assert that by pursuing some modernized capabilities, the United States is threatening to lead yet another action-reaction cycle of the arms race. The implicit policy implication of this argument is that if the United States steps back from its modernization program, others, including Russia and China will do likewise. Testing this critique against actual history, however, suggests otherwise. John Rood, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Trump Administration, noted the "hollowness" of this argument, suggesting that those who propagate it are "impervious to data."³³

This *Occasional Paper* builds upon the ground-breaking 1970's work of Colin Gray, Albert Wohlstetter, and others who analyzed the action-reaction dynamic. It examines key "inflection points" representing major changes in the U.S.

³³ Telephone interview conducted on April 23, 2020.

approach to nuclear policy, strategy, and programs from the Johnson Administration to the present day. It documents the evolution of the action-reaction arms race narrative and how it was employed during major inflection points both during and following the Cold War:

- The U.S. decision to forego strategic missile defense in the late 1960s and early 1970s;
- The issuance of the 1974 National Security Decision Memorandum-242 (NSDM-242) and the U.S. movement to develop “Limited Nuclear Options”;
- The issuance of the 1980 Presidential Directive-59 (PD-59) and U.S. movement toward the “Countervailing Strategy” that called for a reinvigoration of U.S. nuclear weapons modernization efforts;
- The 1980’s nuclear rebuilding program;
- The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program;
- The decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and deploy a limited national missile defense system in the early 2000s;
- The post-Cold War U.S. goal of reducing U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons (with an increased focus on nuclear terrorism and nonproliferation); and
- Moving toward nuclear modernization in the wake of a return to great power competition over the last several years.

The U.S. Decision to Forego Missile Defense

In the early 1960s, the United States had both the strategic goal and the means of protecting the U.S. homeland against strategic nuclear attack. This included an extensive air defense network. The Johnson Administration inherited the Nike-X development program, a successor to even earlier U.S. missile defense development programs, designed to protect the United States from Soviet ICBMs. In 1965, the Department of Defense authorized Bell Laboratories, developer of the Nike-X system, to modify it to provide defensive capabilities against a possible Nth country threat, namely the People's Republic of China (PRC), in addition to more sophisticated Soviet threats.³⁴ Consequently, the program was conceived to provide defensive coverage for the entire continental United States.³⁵

But the goal to protect the U.S. homeland rapidly receded in priority as the expansion of Soviet ICBM forces rendered the feasibility of highly effective U.S. homeland protection technically and financially questionable. Secretary of Defense McNamara openly discussed his expectation that the Soviet Union would react to the U.S. deployment of strategic missile defense by adding to its offensive capabilities--thereby nullifying at relatively lower cost any meaningful U.S. defensive capability. Consequently, the United States came to rely instead on mutual deterrence, i.e., creating and maintaining a "balance

³⁴ *ABM Research & Development at Bell Laboratories - Project History* (Whippany, NJ: Bell Laboratories, October 1975), p. I-43, available at [http://www.decadecounter.com/vta/pdf/ABM%20Research%20&%20Development%20at%20Bell%20Laboratories%20-%20Project%20History%20\[1975-10\].pdf](http://www.decadecounter.com/vta/pdf/ABM%20Research%20&%20Development%20at%20Bell%20Laboratories%20-%20Project%20History%20[1975-10].pdf).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

of terror,” to prevent Soviet attack rather than on active and passive U.S. defenses to protect against it. It appears that on the basis of an expected disadvantageous action-reaction interaction, U.S. policy moved away from missile defense to protect U.S. society against Soviet strategic missiles. Ironically perhaps, this decision appears to be a prominent example of an action-inaction interaction (led by the Soviet Union) based on the U.S. expectation of an action-reaction interaction.

The decision to rely almost exclusively on “deterrence by threat of punishment” for protection of the United States was a major inflection point in U.S. national security and foreign policy. Never before in U.S. history had the government decided to give its adversary’s weapons a “free ride” to U.S. territory or, as a matter of official policy, to allow an adversary to hold U.S. citizens hostage in the interest of “stability.” However, sustaining a condition of mutual vulnerability for the purpose of deterrence “stability” was the officially expressed U.S. rationale for the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which strictly limited strategic missile defense development and deployment.³⁶

³⁶ The ABM Treaty, a part of the SALT I agreements, limited both countries’ missile defense deployments to two sites: one to defend its offensive forces and one to protect its National Capital Region. The ABM Treaty also imposed qualitative and quantitative restrictions on missile defense research and development. Because of the ABM Treaty, the construction of a missile defense site in Montana was terminated. Although construction of the site in North Dakota proceeded, it was only operational from October 1975 to February 1976 when Congress decided to stop funding it. The United States decided not to proceed with construction of a missile defense site around Washington, D.C., and the ABM Treaty was amended in 1974 to permit only one missile defense site each for the United States and the Soviet Union.

By the early 1970s, the United States sought to codify mutual deterrence (based on the principle of "mutual assured destruction") with the Soviet Union through arms control, which was intended to limit the expansion of Soviet counterforce capabilities and preserve the balance of terror. Strategic missile defenses came to be regarded in the United States as an obstacle to achieving negotiated offensive arms limitations via arms control because U.S. deployment of missile defense was expected—per a U.S.-led action-reaction cycle—to compel the Soviet Union to expand its offensive missile capabilities to overcome U.S. defenses. Consequently, it was argued that U.S. strategic missile defense would be both ineffective and an impediment to arms control—as well as prohibitively expensive.

Critics of U.S. missile defense efforts claimed that these efforts would directly drive an acceleration of the arms race with the Soviet Union and that their cessation would lead to a static balance of strategic offensive forces at roughly similar levels. They argued that once the Soviet Union achieved this parity, it would not seek more offensive nuclear forces as long as the United States would forego strategic missile defense deployments. As Jerome Wiesner argued in his 1967 article declaring the Cold War dead, "If the ABM systems are built, there will certainly be further large increases in military expenditures for new and more sophisticated weapons as both sides jockey to maintain a credible deterrent to try to protect their citizens from the horrors of nuclear war."³⁷ Additionally, critics portrayed U.S. missile defense programs as an obstacle to reaching an

³⁷ Jerome B. Wiesner, "The Cold War Is Dead, But the Arms Race Rumbles On," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 23, No. 6 (June 1, 1967), pp. 5-9, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.1967.11455084>.

arms control agreement with the Soviet Union on strategic offensive arms.

The historical record is clear: based largely on the expectation of disadvantageous costs associated with an action-reaction dynamic and deterrence instability, the United States chose to forego strategic missile defense, and on the basis of inaction-inaction expectations, pursued the ABM Treaty in 1972. While many hailed Soviet agreement to the ABM Treaty as indicative of Soviet acceptance of a balance of terror and parity, as noted above, it appears instead that the Soviet Union pursued the ABM Treaty to free resources for its offensive missile program and to limit U.S. competitive advantages in an area that could challenge its nuclear missile forces.³⁸ The Soviet Union accelerated its nuclear strategic offensive force build up, even as the United States scaled down and eventually terminated its strategic missile defense efforts.

The available evidence demonstrates convincingly that the U.S. decision to forego strategic missile defense was largely the result of a U.S. belief in the action-reaction dynamic and that the United States pursued the ABM Treaty in the mistaken expectation that by doing so it would mitigate Soviet motives for further building up its strategic missile capabilities, i.e., inaction-inaction. Available evidence also demonstrates that the U.S. decision to forego missile defenses was followed by an acceleration of the

³⁸ As a CIA analysis at the time concluded, "Soviet agreement to this treaty probably reflects a desire to limit competition in an area where the US had significant technical advantages and stood to lengthen its lead. In this regard, the Soviets would believe that they gave up little and gained substantial benefits." See *Soviet Nuclear Doctrine: Concepts of Intercontinental and Theater War* (Langley, VA: Central Intelligence Agency, June 1973), p. 4, available at https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000268107.pdf.

Soviet buildup of strategic offensive arms. The notion that this decision would have the opposite effect on Soviet behavior is contrary to the historical record. Despite this historical fact, critics of contemporary U.S. strategic missile defense continue to express the same argument today.

The U.S. Movement to Develop “Limited Nuclear Options”

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet nuclear buildup included a dramatic increase in the number and accuracy of Soviet ICBM warheads, despite U.S. attempts to limit the threat to U.S. retaliatory capabilities through arms control. Soviet improvements and capability increases meant that for the first time in U.S. history, the United States was vulnerable to a devastating missile attack by an adversary that could credibly threaten to destroy the U.S. homeland. At the same time, the USSR also increased its conventional and nuclear capabilities in Europe.

The consequent U.S. homeland vulnerability to missile attack ultimately led to a U.S. policy revision, National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM)-242—the 1974 “Schlesinger Doctrine.” NSDM-242 called for the development of U.S. “limited nuclear options” (LNOs) designed to give a president alternatives to a large-scale nuclear response to a Soviet provocation.³⁹ Prior to that policy development, there was an official assumption that “the threat of large-scale nuclear retaliation provided the

³⁹ See National Security Decision Memorandum-242, *Policy for Planning the Employment of Nuclear Weapons*, January 17, 1974, available at https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdm-nixon/nsdm_242.pdf.

best deterrence,"⁴⁰ and according to Secretary Schlesinger all U.S. strategic targeting options involved "dumping literally thousands of weapons on the Soviet Union."⁴¹ However, with the Schlesinger Doctrine, LNOs were considered critical because U.S. vulnerability to attack was thought to render less than fully credible a large-scale U.S. nuclear response to a limited Soviet attack, or a Soviet attack on U.S. allies, particularly in Europe.

The development of LNOs was not a rejection of deterrence but rather an effort to strengthen deterrence by providing the president with more credible response options. The key development driving the United States to incorporate LNOs into its planning was the continuing expansion of Soviet ICBM capabilities and the resultant U.S. need for the range of U.S. nuclear deterrent threat options that the Administration considered necessary for credible extended deterrence.

Critics, following the action-reaction metaphor, contended that the new policy direction and related U.S. programs were going to "push the arms race further along the road" because they "must inevitably look to the Russians like an attempt to acquire a first-strike counterforce capability against their ICBM's."⁴² It was

⁴⁰ *Current U.S. Strategic Targeting Doctrine*, December 3, 1979, available at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB43/doc20.pdf>.

⁴¹ See James Schlesinger's testimony in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S.-U.S.S.R. Strategic Policies*, Hearings, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, March 4, 1974 (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1974), p. 9, available at https://www.google.com/books/edition/U_S_U_S_S_R_Strategic_Policies/MHInQAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=us/ussr+strategic+policies+schlesinger+%22dumping+literally+thousands%22&pg=PA9&printsec=frontcover.

⁴² Herbert Scoville, "Flexible Madness?," *Foreign Policy*, No. 14 (Spring 1974), p. 170, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/1147955>.

argued the Russians would surely pursue "expensive programs" to "reduce their vulnerability."⁴³ Others suggested that the preferable course of action would be U.S. restraint, which would be reciprocated by Soviet restraint, i.e., inaction-inaction. Two such critics of the Schlesinger Doctrine called for "American self-restraint," suggesting, "To the extent that American activity might be an influential factor in Soviet weapons decisions, its role could probably be minimized if the United States adopted a policy of restraint in its pursuit of counterforce capability and undertook a concerted effort to project a conciliatory image."⁴⁴ Still others suggested the type of "counterforce improvements" called for in the Schlesinger Doctrine would undermine the prospects for arms control agreements and would "create strong pressures in the U.S.S.R. to expand old programs or to start new ones that either match or compensate for the U.S. programs."⁴⁵

Yet, the U.S. 1974 policy shift which called for the development of limited nuclear options, clearly was motivated by the continuing increase in Soviet ICBMs and conventional force capabilities in Europe. As such, it appears to be an example of an action-reaction interaction, but the reverse of the action-reaction dynamic posited in public debate. The United States was responding to Soviet nuclear and conventional force buildups that challenged the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent and degraded the U.S. capacity to assure allies, particularly in NATO. As then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld noted in 1977,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ted Greenwood and Michael L. Nacht, "The New Nuclear Debate: Sense or Nonsense?," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (July 1974), pp. 774, 780.

⁴⁵ Barry Carter, "Nuclear Strategy and Nuclear Weapons," *Scientific American*, Vol. 230, No. 5, May 1974, p. 29.

“it should now be evident that the Soviets have taken the initiative in a wide range of programs, that restraint on our part (whatever its reason) has not been reciprocated – and is not likely to be....”⁴⁶

The Schlesinger Doctrine did not appear to drive any additional increase in the expansion in Soviet capabilities which was well underway, despite the predictable domestic criticism based on the assumed U.S.-led action-reaction dynamic. And, the buildup in Soviet strategic counterforce capabilities continued without a comparable U.S. response because doing so was contrary to the U.S. understanding of the requirements for deterrence stability – again an example quite the reverse of the typical U.S.-led action-reaction explanation of the arms race. The United States did not mimic Soviet developments by seeking a significant counterforce advantage against Soviet hardened targets.

This particular interaction demonstrates well Colin Gray’s point that a leadership’s strategic culture shapes its armament choices in ways that cannot be explained by the reductionist action-reaction metaphor.⁴⁷ In this case, the U.S. goal of deterrence stability and conception of the requirements for stability led the United States to not respond similarly to the continuing Soviet counterforce buildup despite the fact that the United States had the technical capability to do so. In short, the 1974 Schlesinger Doctrine is another inflection point that demonstrates that the action-reaction dynamic as employed in public debate

⁴⁶ Donald H. Rumsfeld, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1978*, January 17, 1977, p. 62, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1978_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-150750-460.

⁴⁷ Colin S. Gray, *The Soviet-American Arms Race* (Lexington, MA: Saxon House Studies, 1976).

to challenge U.S. policy and programmatic developments is contrary to historical evidence.

The Carter Administration's "Countervailing Strategy"

The relaxation of tensions that the United States expected following its *détente* policy with the Soviet Union did not materialize, as Soviet international behavior became more aggressive and Soviet military threats to the United States and NATO increased. This prompted the Carter Administration to reassess U.S. nuclear weapons policies and programs. As the Soviet nuclear buildup continued unabated throughout the 1970s, the Soviet Union linked its growing nuclear capabilities to its self-expressed perception of greater freedom to intervene against Western interests and in support of "wars of national liberation" globally.⁴⁸ The Soviet Union challenged Western interests on multiple fronts through the use of proxies in regional conflicts, including in Mozambique, Ethiopia, Angola, South Yemen, and through direct military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979.

At the time, the United States was judged to have a rough strategic equivalence with the Soviet Union; however, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Advisor, warned that this equivalence was "being threatened by the military competition in which the Soviets had, it appeared to us, greater latitude in the enhancement of their strategic forces than we did."⁴⁹ "The lack of

⁴⁸ See, Payne, *Nuclear Deterrence in US-Soviet Relations*, op. cit., pp. 79-122.

⁴⁹ *SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust*, Transcript of the Proceedings of the Musgrove Conference of the Carter-Brezhnev Project, Musgrove

transparency with respect to the Soviet strategic doctrine was a real problem for the United States,” according to President Carter’s Secretary of Defense Harold Brown.⁵⁰ Moscow appeared determined to spread its ideology and influence in regional theaters and its doctrine linked its growing nuclear capabilities to its freedom to do so. U.S. policy makers faced the need to contain Soviet expansionism in the context of U.S. homeland vulnerability, a more aggressive Soviet Union worldwide, and an increasing conventional force imbalance in Europe.⁵¹

In response to Soviet moves, toward the end of his tenure, President Carter recognized that he would have to enhance the U.S. strategic position. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s decision to support the MX missile was made in this light.⁵² The results of the Carter Administration’s study in 1977 led to the July 1980 Presidential Directive (PD)-59, the “Countervailing Strategy.” For the Carter Administration, ensuring stable deterrence was “perhaps the most important goal,” according to Harold Brown.⁵³ Despite critics who argued that the United States would be starting another round of the arms race, the Carter Administration made a conscious choice to reduce and avoid “the inauguration of new

Plantation, St. Simon’s Island, GA, May 7-9, 1994, p. 119, available at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/carterbrezhnev/C-B%20-%20SALT%20II%20-%20Musgrove%20master%20transcript.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵¹ Leon Sloss, in R.L. Rinne, ed., *The History of NATO TNF Policy: The Role of Studies, Analysis and Exercises Conference Proceedings, Volume 1, Introduction and Summary* (Livermore, CA: Sandia National Laboratories, February 1994), p. 51, available at <https://www.osti.gov/servlets/purl/10132869>.

⁵² *SALT II and the Growth of Mistrust*, op. cit., p. 120.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 117.

weapons systems or strategies that could erode deterrence."⁵⁴ PD-59 "retained the principle of assured retaliation with a large preplanned strike in the event the United States was attacked, but it fundamentally altered the options for using nuclear weapons" in the event of a war in the European theater.⁵⁵

PD-59 was intended to continue the move, begun with NSDM-242, to increase the flexibility of U.S. nuclear employment planning and provide U.S. deterrence options specifically geared to the priorities and values of the Soviet leadership.⁵⁶ PD-59 recognized the possibility of a protracted nuclear exchange, potentially integrated with conventional operations. The document resulted in an extensive nuclear weapons modernization program that subsequently was sustained and expanded by the Reagan Administration.

Continued increases in Soviet nuclear weapons capabilities, particularly including hard target kill capabilities, were the genesis of concern over the "window of vulnerability." Existing Minuteman ICBMs in their silos, now increasingly vulnerable to a Soviet first strike, provided the only prompt hard target capability in the U.S. Triad. Without a survivable ICBM force, in the event of a limited Soviet counterforce first strike U.S. retaliatory options would be limited largely to soft targets, potentially inviting a "city-busting" response by the Soviet Union.

The way the United States reacted to the Soviet Union's attempts to attain a first-strike capability against U.S.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Odom, "The Origins and Design of Presidential Decision-59: A Memoir," op. cit., p. 175. In the opinion of General Odom, the doctrine was "never fully implemented in force structure and doctrine."

⁵⁶ Presidential Directive/NSC-59, *Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy*, July 25, 1980, available at <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/pd/pd59.pdf>.

ICBMs did not follow the action-reaction metaphor as popularly espoused: the United States was not the instigator in a drive to attain superiority over its adversary; nor did it respond by copying the Soviets' concurrent production of numerous missile types. The United States responded by seeking to ensure the survivability and efficacy of its nuclear deterrent without parroting Soviet actions. In other words, instead of increasing the number and capability of the U.S. ICBM force in ways that would match or exceed Soviet systems, the United States sought to make its land-based strategic deterrent more survivable by using hardening and dispersal techniques (e.g., consideration of multiple MX deployment schemes, including the "racetrack" approach, which would have shuttled a single MX missile among a configuration of 23 shelters in an attempt to conceal the missile's location from Soviet reconnaissance assets).

Despite the asymmetry in U.S. and Soviet hard target kill capability (to the Soviet advantage), the United States reduced the planned number of deployed MX missiles from 200 to 100, ultimately deploying only 50 MX missiles in the same (although somewhat modified) Minuteman silos that had become vulnerable to a Soviet first strike. U.S. actions in this instance hardly fit the public caricature of an action-reaction arms race. Nor did the U.S. deployment of the MX ICBM in fixed and vulnerable Minuteman silos track with the basic tenets of the Carter Administration's "countervailing strategy," which called for ensuring the "enduring survivability" of U.S. nuclear forces.⁵⁷

The criticism of the Carter Administration's Countervailing Strategy shared many of the same arguments (usually made by the same people) leveled

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

against the 1974 "Schlesinger Doctrine." For example, Spurgeon Keeney and Wolfgang Panofsky labeled the approach to deterrence stemming from PD-59 "Nuclear Utilization Target Selection" or "NUTS" for short.⁵⁸ They argued that, "the availability of increasing numbers of nuclear weapons in a variety of designs and delivery packages...inevitably encourages the illusion that somehow nuclear weapons can be applied in selected circumstances without unleashing a catastrophic series of consequences."⁵⁹ The critics argued that the approach "creates its own endless pressure for expanded nuclear stockpiles with increasing danger of accidents, accidental use, diversion to terrorists, etc."⁶⁰ In their view, the most problematic aspect of this approach was that it would "destabilize" mutual deterrence and drive the arms race. In practice, however, successive U.S. presidential administrations were aware of the inadequacies of relying exclusively on a massive "assured destruction" threat for deterrence, and in one way or another tried to modify it, and the Soviet expansion of nuclear and conventional forces continued with remarkable continuity.⁶¹

The Carter Administration's "Countervailing Strategy" was clearly a reaction to the continuing expansion of Soviet nuclear and conventional capabilities. This expansion demonstrated that the USSR's goal was not "parity" with the United States or adherence to Western "balance of

⁵⁸ Spurgeon M. Keeney and Wolfgang K. H. Panofsky, "Mad versus Nuts: Can Doctrine or Weaponry Remedy the Mutual Hostage Relationship of the Superpowers?," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Winter 1981), p. 289, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/20041081>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Walter Slocombe, "The Countervailing Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Spring 1981), p. 19.

terror” notions. Specifically, the Soviet development and deployment of large numbers of heavy ICBMs with high-yield, accurate, MIRVed warheads placed U.S. nuclear retaliatory capabilities at increasing risk. Yet, rather than responding to Soviet developments by building and deploying comparable capabilities, the United States sought to adopt asymmetric measures, including silo hardening and dispersion to protect its retaliatory assets, though in the end it failed to disperse its ICBM force after multiple deployment schemes were considered and rejected.

The Soviet buildup of large counterforce capabilities clearly was not spurred by PD-59 or any other prior U.S. lead action, but rather by the Soviets’ desire to attain a strategic advantage over the United States in the event of war and the associated coercive power to advance its foreign policy goals and global ambitions. In this instance, historical evidence demonstrates that the public narrative of a U.S.-led action-reaction arms race as articulated at the time was again wrong.

The 1980s U.S. Nuclear Rebuilding Program

The Soviet Union’s continued expansion of nuclear capabilities and aggressive geo-political designs provided the impetus that led to NSDM-242, PD-59, and subsequently to the Reagan Administration’s endorsement and expansion of the Carter Administration’s proposed nuclear modernization program. This was the last comprehensive strategic nuclear modernization effort carried out by the United States and resulted in the 1980s introduction of the new MX “Peacekeeper” ICBM; two new long-range bombers (the B-1 and B-2 “Stealth”); air-launched cruise missiles on the B-52; and additional upgraded and more

accurate D-5 sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and sea-launched cruise missiles.⁶²

The Reagan Administration was concerned that the continued growth in Soviet nuclear and conventional force capabilities—in particular, the increase in Soviet ICBM warheads and improvements in their accuracy—called into question the credibility of U.S. deterrence strategy. This same factor drove NSDM-242 and PD-59 as described above. Rather than seeking a return to U.S. strategic superiority, the Reagan Administration’s declared nuclear policy continued to emphasize deterrence and the need to possess “an adequate margin of safety with emphasis on enduring survivability.”⁶³

It was this continuing expansion of Soviet nuclear and conventional capabilities and continuing U.S. need for deterrence of the Soviet Union that led the Reagan Administration to adopt the comprehensive strategic nuclear modernization programs noted above. While the Reagan Administration’s nuclear buildup was clearly a response to Russia’s drive for military supremacy—a drive that corresponded to a more aggressive, expansionist, and anti-American Soviet foreign policy—U.S. nuclear modernization programs did not lead Soviet efforts and did not comport with the action-reaction arms race narrative espoused in public debate. The Reagan strategic nuclear buildup was restrained by comparison—arguably little more than a recapitalization of systems, some of which had

⁶² Daryl G. Kimball, “Looking Back: The Nuclear Arms Control Legacy of Ronald Reagan,” *Arms Control Today*, July 8, 2004, available at https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004_07-08/Reagan.

⁶³ Caspar W. Weinberger, *Annual Report to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1983*, February 8, 1982, p. I-17, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1983_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-150929-423.

been developed in the 1950s, deployed in the 1960s, and were in need of refurbishment and upgrade by the 1980s. As Richard Perle noted, by the start of the Reagan Administration in 1981, the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal “was headed rapidly toward obsolescence.”⁶⁴

Nevertheless, critics of the Reagan Administration’s nuclear weapons strategy employed the familiar action-reaction arms race narrative to argue against the administration’s plans and programs. Senators Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Mark Hatfield (D-OR) argued that the Reagan Administration’s nuclear programs place the world “at the starting line of a new round in the arms race, one that resurrects the specter of a first strike and that could shake the nuclear balance in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways.”⁶⁵ W. Averell Harriman, former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, lamented “a nuclear arms race rapidly escaping out of control—and dangerously passing the point of no return,” as “both the United States and the Soviet Union will have in place intercontinental missiles interpreted each by the other as instruments of a massive first strike” and “shorter-range nuclear missiles nearer each other’s territory.” As Harriman noted, “This is the grim result of Reagan Administration diplomacy: If present developments in nuclear arms and United States-Soviet relations are permitted to continue, we could face not the risk but the reality of nuclear war.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Telephone interview conducted on May 14, 2020.

⁶⁵ Edward M. Kennedy and Mark O. Hatfield, *Freeze! How You Can Help Prevent Nuclear War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 102.

⁶⁶ W. Averell Harriman, “If the Reagan Pattern Continues, America May Face Nuclear War,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 1984, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/01/01/opinion/if-the-reagan-pattern-continues-america-may-face-nuclear-war.html>.

The "Doomsday Clock" – a regular staple of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* intended to visually capture the impending risk of nuclear war – moved from seven minutes to midnight to four minutes to midnight after the election of Ronald Reagan as president. Three years later, the clock advanced another minute closer to midnight, with a warning that "the arms race—a sort of dialogue between weapons—has intensified" and that little has been done "to impede the momentum of the arms race."⁶⁷

The Reagan Administration's response to the continuing expansion of Soviet strategic nuclear programs, and the same action-reaction oriented criticism of that response, played out at the theater nuclear level. Even before the Reagan Administration embarked on an effort to rebuild and modernize the U.S. strategic nuclear deterrent, the Soviet Union was expanding its non-strategic (also called "tactical" or "theater") nuclear forces arrayed against Western Europe. This included the ground-based SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM), which replaced older Soviet SS-4 and SS-5 IRBMs. NATO's "two track" decision in 1979 to deploy its own ground-based Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) ballistic and cruise missile systems in Europe in response to the Soviet INF deployments, and simultaneously to seek to negotiate the elimination of such systems with the Soviet Union, placed the Reagan Administration in a position of simultaneously pursuing new theater nuclear deployments in NATO Europe and corresponding arms control negotiations.

⁶⁷ "Three minutes to midnight," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 1984, p. 2, available at <https://thebulletin.org/sites/default/files/1984%20Clock%20Statement.pdf>.

More than one million protesters reportedly turned out in West Germany on a single day in 1983 to voice their opposition to the planned NATO INF deployments, with massive rallies and protests also taking place in other European capitals.⁶⁸ The Soviet Union actively encouraged and supported these protest movements in an effort to preclude NATO's INF deployment and split the alliance by suggesting the United States was seeking to make Western Europe a nuclear battlefield. The intelligence services of the Soviet Union's Eastern Europe satellite states reportedly played a significant role in the effort.⁶⁹ Despite this intense domestic and foreign pressure put on Western governments, NATO solidarity remained unbroken and the United States began the deployment of 108 Pershing II ballistic missiles and 464 GLCMs in 1983. It was only after the United States deployed its own INF systems in Europe that the Soviet Union agreed to negotiate seriously for their removal, along with the SS-4s, SS-5s, and SS-20s that prompted NATO's countervailing deployments in the first place. The alliance's steadfastness in light of extensive Soviet pressure convinced the Soviets to accept the "Zero Option," which later became the Intermediate-Range

⁶⁸ William Drozdiak, "More Than a Million Protest Missiles in Western Europe," *The Washington Post*, October 23, 1983, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/10/23/more-than-a-million-protest-missiles-in-western-europe/9d703245-36fa-40ce-8714-e281f796a472/>.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the role of the Czech intelligence service, see Vladimír Černý & Petr Suchý, "Spies and Peaceniks: Czechoslovak Intelligence Attempts to Thwart NATO's Dual-Track Decision," National Institute for Public Policy *Information Series*, Issue No. 456, April 8, 2020, available at <https://www.nipp.org/2020/04/08/cerny-vladimir-and-petr-suchy-spies-and-peaceniks-czechoslovak-intelligence-attempts-to-thwart-natos-dual-track-decision/>.

Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The INF Treaty was signed by Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev in December 1987.

Contrary to the assertions of those who criticized U.S. INF deployments in Europe as a dangerous and destabilizing harbinger of yet another U.S.-led spiral in the arms race, the deployment of the Pershing II and GLCM actually led to the first arms control agreement that eliminated an entire class of nuclear systems. In retrospect, it is highly unlikely this outcome would have been possible had Soviet INF deployments remained unchallenged. As then Secretary of State George P. Schultz stated, "If the West did not deploy Pershing II and cruise missiles, there would be no incentive for the Soviets to negotiate seriously for nuclear weapons reductions."⁷⁰ Policy suggestions based on the usual action-reaction critique of U.S. policy and programs proved again to be wholly contrary to the historical evidence.

The U.S. nuclear modernization of the 1980s demonstrates again the fallacies of the action-reaction arms race narrative. At the strategic level, the United States was guided by mounting concerns over a growing Soviet nuclear advantage, especially the growth in Soviet counterforce capabilities realized by the quantitative and qualitative expansion of Soviet large, heavily-MIRVed ICBM capabilities. U.S. actions were motivated by concerns over the corresponding degradation of U.S. deterrence and extended deterrence caused by this Soviet drive for nuclear superiority. The U.S. response was not the lead action in an action-reaction dynamic nor did it mirror Soviet actions.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, p. 55, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

Rather than seeking to increase the size and counterforce capability of the U.S. ICBM force, the United States sought to ensure the survivability of its retaliatory deterrent. This included the hardening of existing ICBM silos and the deployment of a new ICBM, the MX “Peacekeeper,” initially intended to be in a mobile configuration to enhance its survivability. In fact, the MX ICBM was deployed in significantly fewer numbers than originally proposed and placed in the same stationary (and vulnerable) silos that housed the Minuteman ICBM force.

With respect to non-strategic nuclear systems, Soviet actions—particularly in deploying the SS-20 IRBM in Europe—led to a countervailing response by the United States and NATO, i.e., deployment of Pershing IIs and GLCMs in Europe and the initiation of a theater nuclear arms control track. Here again, the typical action-reaction arms race narrative espoused domestically and abroad at the time proved false, as U.S. counter-deployments were a responsive move and resulted not in an arms *buildup* or *arms race*, but in an *arms control* treaty that, for the first time in history, eliminated an entire class of nuclear armaments. The INF Treaty was hailed, even by critics of the Reagan Administration’s nuclear policies, as a watershed event and a positive development in not only halting, but in reversing a potential arms race.

The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)

On March 23, 1983, after more than a decade of strict adherence to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, President Ronald Reagan announced a potentially major shift in U.S. strategic policy. The ABM Treaty prohibited an effective nationwide defense against strategic ballistic missile attack, codified the “balance of terror” thought to be

essential for deterrence to function reliably, and reflected the prevailing belief that strategic missile defenses were technologically infeasible, cost ineffective, destabilizing, and the cause of strategic arms racing. The ABM Treaty was seen by its supporters as a way of preventing an action-reaction arms race by eliminating the need for the Soviets to build up their strategic offensive nuclear forces.

In his address to the nation, President Reagan declared that "what it takes to maintain deterrence has changed." He noted, "For 20 years the Soviet Union has been accumulating enormous military might. They didn't stop when their forces exceeded all requirements of a legitimate defensive capability. And they haven't stopped now." Consequently, Reagan cited "the necessity to break out of a future that relies solely on offensive retaliation for our security" and proposed "a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive" by rendering nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete."⁷¹ The result was the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program.

Although SDI was a research and development program to be carried out, as Reagan noted, "consistent with our obligations of the ABM treaty," critics accused the Administration of opening the doors to a resumption of the arms race. The argument that SDI would spark an action-reaction arms race was identical to the action-reaction and corresponding inaction-inaction narratives prevalent during the earlier ABM debate in the 1960s and 1970s—a narrative which proved to be false.

Consistent with the action-reaction paradigm, Strobe Talbott, a journalist who later became Deputy Secretary of

⁷¹ President Ronald W. Reagan, *Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security*, March 23, 1983, available at Reaganfoundation.org/media/128846/nation4.pdf.

State, stated that missile defenses would lead to “unceasing competition without stability.”⁷² Reagan’s response was to suggest that the defensive technology developed under SDI could be shared with the Soviets “to prove to them that there was no longer any need for keeping these missiles.”⁷³ Nevertheless, domestic critics of SDI insisted it would undermine arms control and intensify an arms race.

Then-Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) stated, “you cannot have SDI and arms control at the same time.”⁷⁴ Several other analysts noted, “In short, SDI will surely complicate efforts at arms control and stimulate an intensified arms race.”⁷⁵ Reflecting both the action-reaction and inaction-inaction metaphors, others insisted that “...it is possible to reach good agreements, or possible to insist on the [SDI] program as it stands, but wholly impossible to do both.”⁷⁶ As the Union of Concerned Scientists reported, by June 1986, some 6,500 professors and graduate students in the physical sciences and engineering departments of major U.S.

⁷² Cited in Mark W. Davis, “Reagan’s Real Reason for SDI,” *Policy Review* (Palo Alto, CA: The Hoover Institution, October 1, 2000), available at <https://www.hoover.org/research/reagans-real-reason-sdi>.

⁷³ Atomic Heritage Foundation, *Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)*, July 18, 2018, available at <https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/strategic-defense-initiative-sdi>.

⁷⁴ W. Bruce Weinrod, “Strategic Defense: Implications for Arms Negotiations,” The Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, October 16, 1985, available at http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf_media/1985/pdf/bg463.pdf.

⁷⁵ Jerome Slater and David Goldfischer, “Can SDI Provide a Defense?,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 5, 1986, p. 842.

⁷⁶ McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith, “The President’s Choice: Star Wars or Arms Control,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 2, Winter 1984/85, pp. 273, 277, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1984-12-01/arms-control-presidents-choice-star-wars-or-arms-control>.

universities had signed a pledge not to participate in SDI work, declaring that missile defenses "will only serve to escalate the nuclear arms race by encouraging the development of both additional offensive overkill and an all-out competition in anti-ballistic-missile weapons."⁷⁷

Other critics of SDI argued that the Soviets "would certainly develop counter measures, increase their offensive capacity, and so on."⁷⁸ One critique stated that "deploying defensive systems or...increasing their capability to destroy the opponent's forces first, will almost certainly be futile, because these efforts will lead to more nuclear offensive arms for both and may add to the danger of a nuclear holocaust."⁷⁹ Some suggested the program would instigate "an expensive arms race" that could "bankrupt not only the Soviet, but the U.S. economy as well."⁸⁰ Moreover, they argued, SDI would be "carrying the arms race into space."⁸¹ Amb. Averell Harriman argued that "the arms race is about to be launched into space" and that SDI "will mean that both sides will accumulate thousands more offensive weapons to overcome whatever defenses they each might

⁷⁷ William Sweet, "Scientists shoot down Star Wars," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August 1987, p. 7, cited in, Matthew Lippman, "The Strategic Defense Initiative and the Militarization of Space: Scientific Responsibility and Citizen Resistance," *Penn State International Law Review*, Volume 9, Number 2, 1991, available at <https://elibrary.law.psu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1136&context=psilr>.

⁷⁸ Charles Krauthammer, "The Illusion of Star Wars," *The New Republic*, May 14, 1984, p. 16, cited in, Keith B. Payne, *Strategic Defense: "Star Wars" in Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986), p. 100.

⁷⁹ George Rathjens and Jack Ruina, "Nuclear Doctrine and Rationality," *Daedalus*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (Winter 1981), p. 181.

⁸⁰ Dietrich Fischer, "Strategic Defense Initiative as a Cause of Crisis Instability," *Journal of Legislation*, Vol. 15, Issue 2, Article 8 (1989), p. 148, available at <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/jleg/vol15/iss2/8>.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

devise.”⁸² As several other critics noted, “If the U.S. decides to field space-based interceptors...[it] could provide a rationale for other actors to exploit this domain, creating an arms-race dynamic among major space powers.”⁸³ Embellishing on this theme, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) derisively referred to SDI as “Star Wars.”⁸⁴

The narrative of the SDI critics was a perfect example of how U.S. policy was portrayed as *initiating* a new spiral in the arms race, i.e., U.S. *action* would lead to a Soviet *reaction* and thereby cause an arms race. The U.S. approach to defensive measures that could protect the American people against a ballistic missile attack was considered both destabilizing and dangerous; it was argued it would lead to a “militarization of the heavens,”⁸⁵ an increase in offensive nuclear arms, a competition in strategic defensive measures, and ultimately bankrupt the economy. Employing the classic action-reaction metaphor, several SDI opponents argued that the program would “trigger a major expansion of the arms race,”⁸⁶ noting:

⁸² Harriman, op. cit.

⁸³ Michael Elleman and Gentoku Toyoma, “Will space-based missile interceptors weaponise space?,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, December 20, 2018, available at <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/12/missile-interceptors-weaponise-space>.

⁸⁴ “‘Star Wars’: How the Term Arose,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 1985, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/25/world/star-wars-how-the-term-arose.html>.

⁸⁵ See for example, Jay Nordlinger, “SDI at 30, Part II,” *National Review*, March 23, 2013, available at <https://www.nationalreview.com/2013/03/sdi-30-part-ii-jay-nordlinger/>.

⁸⁶ Hans A. Bethe, Richard L. Garwin, Kurt Gottfried and Henry W. Kendall, “Space-based Ballistic-Missile Defense,” *Scientific American*, Vol. 251, No. 4 (October 1984), p. 39.

The most likely Russian response to a U.S. decision to pursue the president's Strategic Defense Initiative should be expected to rely on traditional military "worst case" analysis.... In this instance the Russians will surely overestimate the effectiveness of the U.S. ballistic-missile defense and arm accordingly.... A compensating U.S. buildup in offensive missiles would then be inevitable...[that] would guarantee an accelerated offensive arms race.⁸⁷

This narrative, however, generally ignored the reality of Soviet strategic developments that *preceded* the SDI program, including a massive Soviet buildup of offensive counterforce capabilities (despite the ABM Treaty's prohibition on strategic missile defenses, which, it was thought, would preclude an additional offensive buildup) and a substantial Soviet investment in and deployment of its own strategic defensive systems, including the world's only ABM system, a massive network of early warning radars and air defenses to provide extensive defensive coverage for the country, and extensive civil defense preparations. Soviet strategic nuclear warheads reportedly expanded from roughly 2,000 in 1972 to approximately 12,000 by 1990—a six-fold increase in the nearly two decades since the ABM Treaty entered into force.⁸⁸ Moreover, the Soviets began to upgrade their own nuclear-armed ABM system beginning in 1980, three years before

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸⁸ Baker Spring, "Myths About Missile Defense and the Arms Race," The Heritage Foundation, July 13, 2000, available at <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/myths-about-missile-defense-and-the-arms-race>.

President Reagan announced the SDI program.⁸⁹ Yet again, the action-reaction metaphor, as employed, treated the Soviet Union as a benign cog caught in a mechanistic U.S.-led arms race dynamic.

Whereas SDI was a *response* to the continuing Soviet offensive and defensive buildup of the 1970s, and an attempt to move beyond the traditional offense-dominant approach to deterrence where the Soviet Union enjoyed a growing advantage, critics portrayed it as the *initiator* of an action-reaction cycle of the arms race. As a familiar corollary to this narrative, critics again contended that if the United States abandoned its attempt to defend against incoming ballistic missiles and remained in strict compliance with the ABM Treaty, the Soviet Union would have no reason or incentive to further grow its own strategic nuclear offensive capabilities or pursue strategic missile defense. This inaction-inaction narrative was reminiscent of the arguments employed by ABM Treaty supporters in the 1960s and 1970s that proved to be so erroneous. Nevertheless, as one analysis explained, "The underlying assumption was that limitations of ABMs would leave both superpowers unambiguously hostage to each other, would institutionalize MAD, and would thus eliminate the forces driving the offensive arms race."⁹⁰ In retrospect, these claims again proved invalid.

Although SDI never came to fruition, the Soviet Union continued to expand its strategic nuclear forces both quantitatively and qualitatively, heavily MIRVing its large, counterforce capable ICBMs, proceeding with the development and deployment of newer, more sophisticated

⁸⁹ Keith B. Payne, *Strategic Defense: "Star Wars" in Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986), p. 53.

⁹⁰ Slater and Goldfischer, *op. cit.*, p. 853.

ballistic missiles and delivery vehicles, and improving its overall strategic defenses. Clearly, neither the assumption that SDI would initiate another spiral in the U.S.-Soviet arms race, nor the contention that abandoning SDI would remove the Soviet Union's incentive to expand its own strategic offensive and defensive capabilities were validated by history. The Soviet Union continued to expand its offensive and defensive capabilities as before the SDI was announced and similarly after the SDI was reduced to a development program only in continuing strict compliance with the ABM Treaty. The narrative proffered by SDI critics—namely, the familiar action-reaction and corollary inaction-inaction contentions—is not supported by this history.

SDI was a major inflection point in U.S. policy that sought to reverse nearly two decades of U.S. adherence to a mutual deterrence paradigm based on a "balance of terror." The SDI program was a reaction to continuing improvements in Soviet strategic offensive and defense capabilities. The SDI example clearly demonstrates an interaction between the United States and Soviet Union in the area of strategic armaments but is inconsistent with the type of action-reaction paradigm that opponents of SDI publicly charged. It is also inconsistent with the inaction-inaction narrative that suggested the Soviets would refrain from adding to their strategic offensive nuclear arsenal if SDI were halted. If anything, Soviet offensive and defensive programs not only continued apace but accelerated after the comprehensive approach to SDI that the Reagan Administration initially sought to pursue was abandoned.

SDI again demonstrated the fallacy of the action-reaction arms race narrative. It was an asymmetric *defensive* response to the buildup of Soviet offensive capabilities and its failure to be realized as originally envisioned neither

halted nor curbed Soviet enthusiasm for improving their own strategic offensive and defensive capabilities.

What SDI was a catalyst for was a Soviet belief that they were unable to compete with the United States in this area and that any such competition had the potential to cause great economic harm to the Soviet Union. When coupled with the Reagan Administration's nuclear rebuilding program of the 1980s, SDI appears to have been a powerful impetus toward reform of the Soviet political system and the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union.

The Demise of the ABM Treaty and the Decision to Deploy a National Missile Defense System

In 2002, the George W. Bush Administration withdrew from the ABM Treaty and initiated the deployment of the current Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system that provides a measure of protection against limited strategic missile threats such as those posed by North Korea and potentially Iran.⁹¹ This deployment program addressed a concern that familiar deterrence strategies may not function reliably against rogue states. As a major inflection point in the evolution of U.S. nuclear policy, it represented a move away from the "balance of terror" deterrence paradigm (vis-à-vis rogue states) that led to the signing of the ABM Treaty three decades earlier. It was also the realization of a more balanced offense-defense deterrence policy in the wake of

⁹¹ The Bush Administration also pursued other strategic missile defense programs that were not deployed (e.g., the Kinetic Energy Interceptor, the Airborne Laser, and the Multiple Kill Vehicle) and upgraded some *Arleigh Burke-class* destroyers and *Ticonderoga-class* cruisers for a missile defense mission.

the Reagan Administration's frustrated aspiration for a defense-dominant approach that was embodied in the original SDI program. It followed a reassessment of the value of homeland defenses and facilitated greater cooperation between the United States and allied countries on measures to protect allied forces and populations against theater missile threats.

The U.S. move to pursue limited homeland missile defense goals was a response to the proliferation of strategic missile capabilities, coupled with nuclear weapons programs, to rogue states. The resultant policy and programs were never intended to provide defenses against great power missile threats, including Russia's more robust and sophisticated ballistic missile forces. President Bush called for new concepts of deterrence and was clear in enunciating the reasons for the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, which he called a "relic of the Cold War."

Yet, the president's missile defense decision was roundly condemned by arms control enthusiasts who believed withdrawing from the ABM Treaty was a dangerous mistake. Most of the critics' arguments were based on the action-reaction metaphor (and its inaction-inaction corollary) suggesting that an arms race would ensue. One critic argued that the "repudiation of defense" codified by the ABM Treaty "was arguably the most important intellectual achievement of the Cold War" and that the decision to withdraw from the treaty "not only...destroy[ed] the arms reduction process (immediately killing START II), it made inevitable the next round of arms escalation."⁹² Such criticisms were again reminiscent of the

⁹² James Carroll, "The Paradox of Missile Defense," *The Boston Globe*, June 9, 2007, available at <http://www.envirosagainstawar.org/2007/06/09/the-paradox-of-missile-defense/>.

arguments made in the 1960s and 1970s against missile defense and in support of the ABM Treaty—arguments which proved faulty.

Then-Senator Joseph Biden declared, “The administration has not offered any convincing rationale” for its decision, and he criticized the president for “walking away from a treaty that has helped keep the peace for the last 30 years.”⁹³ Senator Carl Levin declared that abandoning the ABM Treaty and deploying missile defenses “could result in more nuclear weapons on Russian soil... [and] could result in many more nuclear weapons in China, prompting a buildup in India and Pakistan...”⁹⁴ A former U.S. Ambassador to NATO, along with a former National Security Council staff member, argued that Washington’s unilateral withdrawal “would be a foreign policy disaster” and that “Russia would respond by abandoning its commitment under the START-2 Treaty to slash its nuclear forces.” The “Doomsday Clock,” which had been resting at nine minutes to midnight for the previous four years, was advanced to seven minutes to

⁹³ Cited in, David E. Sanger and Elisabeth Bumiller, “U.S. to Pull Out of ABM Treaty, Clearing Path for Antimissile Tests,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 2001, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/12/world/us-to-pull-out-of-abm-treaty-clearing-path-for-antimissile-tests.html>.

⁹⁴ “Remarks of Senator Carl Levin on National Missile Defense,” National Defense University Forum Breakfast on Ballistic Missile Defense, May 11, 2001, p. 4, cited in, Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century*, op. cit., p. 224. It should be noted that China’s strategic nuclear modernization programs, as one analysis concluded, “were initiated over a decade ago and were probably not a direct response to NMD [National Missile Defense].” See Center for Nonproliferation Studies, *China’s Opposition to US Missile Defense Programs* (Archived Material), 2000, cited in, Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century*, op. cit., p. 320.

midnight—in part because of the U.S. “abandonment” of the ABM Treaty. The editors of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* called the administration’s rationale for dispensing with the ABM Treaty “disingenuous,” predicting that “abandoning the treaty will have serious repercussions for years to come.”⁹⁵

The Bush Administration’s withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was derided by critics as opening the doors to a new action-reaction spiral in the arms race. Supporters of the ABM Treaty argued that the United States was abandoning efforts to manage the strategic competition through arms control and that the inevitable Russian reaction would lead to an increased Russian nuclear arsenal, diminished U.S. security, a more dangerous strategic balance, and an increased prospect of nuclear war.

In reality, the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty coincided with the 2002 Moscow Treaty’s unprecedented nuclear reductions. In this instance, the action-reaction arms control narrative again was stood on its head. Contrary to the predictions of critics, the largest reduction of deployed nuclear weapons in history occurred in the *absence* of the ABM Treaty and *in parallel with* the announced deployment of an initial U.S. missile defense system.

This is another example of how the typical action-reaction/inaction-inaction arms race arguments conflict with historical reality. It demonstrates that U.S. actions again did not drive Russian responses in ways predicted by missile defense critics. A new arms control agreement between the United States and Russia was reached and nuclear reductions were achieved, while the United States

⁹⁵ “It’s seven minutes to midnight,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March/April 2002, pp. 4-5, available at <https://thebulletin.org/sites/default/files/2002%20Clock%20Statement.pdf>.

withdrew from the constraints of a Cold War agreement considered by some to be the “crown jewel” of arms control and proceeded to deploy missile defenses to protect the U.S. homeland against limited missile threats. It also demonstrates again how faulty are mechanistic models of arms racing that do not include political relations, context, and strategic cultures as significant factors in armament decisions. While they are frequently used in arguments against U.S. systems, particularly including missile defense, they are more likely to mislead than to enlighten.

Rogue States, Nuclear Terrorism and Nonproliferation, and Reduced U.S. Reliance on Nuclear Weapons

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, U.S. relations with Russia become much more amicable for a time and the future of U.S-Russian relations appeared bright. The focus of U.S. strategy shifted away from deterrence of Russia, and nuclear weapons were judged to be of limited relevance for the United States in addressing the new priority post-Cold War security challenges of rogue states, terrorism, and proliferation. Official U.S. concern over Russian military developments – including Russia’s nuclear doctrine and posture – waned dramatically.

As the United States deferred its nuclear weapons modernization efforts and scaled back its overall defense posture in the expectation of a “peace dividend,” new nuclear weapon states emerged. Pakistan joined India as a member of the nuclear club in 1998 and North Korea conducted its first nuclear weapons test in 2006. These cases further illustrate that countries will pursue capabilities that

they deem in their interest rather than being prisoners to the mechanistic logic of a U.S.-led action-reaction arms race.

This shift in U.S. policy thinking and nuclear posture, which extended over multiple administrations, was a major inflection point in U.S. nuclear policy. It was characterized by optimistic assessments regarding the U.S. ability to influence Russian behavior in a positive direction. In fact, the United States and Russia were said to face similar threats from proliferation and terrorism, making cooperative engagement mutually beneficial by transitioning the bilateral relationship away from political and military hostility. By downgrading the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policy and shifting the emphasis away from Russia and toward other threats, it was hoped that Russia (and potentially others) would follow suit, demonstrating that U.S. nuclear restraint would induce similar Russian nuclear restraint, consistent with the inaction-inaction narrative.

During this period, the United States stopped developing new nuclear weapons designs, cancelled or delayed strategic systems and modernization efforts, ended underground nuclear testing, and continued to allow its nuclear weapons production complex to atrophy. Under the 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs), the United States also eliminated all forward deployed short-range ground-based nuclear systems and ended deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on naval vessels and aircraft.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, June 2020, pp. 23-26, available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Adherence-to-and-Compliance-with-Arms-Control-Nonproliferation-and-Disarmament-Agreements-and-Commitments-Compliance-Report.pdf>.

Moreover, the United States and NATO reduced the number of conventional forces in Europe.

This restraint (or inaction), however, was not reciprocated by others. For example, except for the United States, every other nuclear weapons state continued to develop and deploy new nuclear weapons. While the United States ended explosive testing of nuclear weapons in 1992, France, China, India, and Pakistan subsequently carried out their own series of nuclear tests, and the 2020 U.S. State Department arms control compliance report notes that “Russia has conducted nuclear weapons experiments that have created nuclear yield.”⁹⁷ And despite U.S. adherence to the PNIs, the United States has determined that “Russia is not adhering to all of its PNI commitments” and “based on Russian activities and statements from Russian officials and military officers from 1994 through the mid-2000s, that Russia no longer feels bound by its PNI pledge to eliminate all nuclear warheads for the ground forces.”⁹⁸ These actions again demonstrate the fallacy of the inaction-inaction corollary to the action-reaction thesis and suggest that other states base their actions on unique national security considerations and not necessarily on prior decisions taken by the United States.

By the end of the Obama Administration it was clear that the hoped-for cooperative relationship with Russia was a chimera and that U.S. inaction on nuclear matters was not followed by similar Russian inaction. In fact, it is likely that U.S. inaction created an incentive for Russian action that would provide Moscow with a strategic advantage.

The expectation of an inaction-inaction dynamic led by the United States again betrayed a mistaken view that

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 50.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Russian armament programs are reactive and driven by the Western concept of parity and mutual stability.

Subsequent iterations of Russia's military doctrine suggest that "Russia has potentially placed a greater reliance on nuclear weapons and may threaten to use them during regional conflicts."⁹⁹ This has been characterized as an "escalate to de-escalate" strategy, whereby Russia envisages its use of limited nuclear threats to coerce Western concessions or the actual limited employment of nuclear weapons to terminate a conflict on terms favorable to Moscow. Russian officials also spoke openly of the "preemptive" use of nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, in recent years, Russian officials have threatened NATO allies and non-NATO states with nuclear attack, including Ukraine, Norway, Denmark, and the Baltic states.¹⁰¹ And in June 2020, Russian President Putin endorsed an expanded version of Russia's military doctrine that allows the use of nuclear weapons if Moscow receives "reliable information" of a missile attack or if Russia's critical government or military infrastructures are threatened by conventional forces.¹⁰² As noted Russian

⁹⁹ Amy F. Woolf, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization*, Congressional Research Service, CRS Report R45861, January 2, 2020, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R45861.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ See for example, "Russia reserves pre-emptive nuclear strike right," *Reuters*, October 13, 2009, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-military-nuclear-sb/russia-reserves-pre-emptive-nuclear-strike-right-idUSTRE59C4XK20091013>.

¹⁰¹ See for example, Mark B. Schneider, "Putin's Plan to Send Russians to Heaven," *RealClearDefense*, December 1, 2018, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/12/01/putins_plan_to_send_russians_to_heaven_113995.html.

¹⁰² Vladimir Isachenkov, "Putin signs Russia's nuclear deterrent policy," *Associated Press*, June 2, 2020, available at

journalist Pavel Felgenhauer has pointed out, “The reasons [for Russia] to use nuclear warheads are widespread and open to interpretation, effectively giving the Kremlin the legal right to ratchet up the threat whenever it pleases.”¹⁰³

These developments provide additional evidence of a sharp contrast between U.S. and Russian approaches to nuclear weapons issues. They reveal that Russian force objectives serve Russian purposes well beyond those presumed by the action-reaction metaphor, i.e., reacting to U.S. initiatives in order to sustain its side of a balance of terror. They also demonstrate again the inapplicability of the action-reaction metaphor, as used in public debate (and its inaction-inaction corollary), to U.S. and Russian developments.

The post-Cold War environment saw the United States seek to engage Russia as a strategic partner rather than an adversary. This occurred over multiple administrations, both Democrat and Republican. The United States exercised restraint in its nuclear and conventional force programs, foregoing the comprehensive modernization of its strategic Triad, in the expectation that Russia would likewise show restraint in its own nuclear programs, i.e., inaction-inaction. However, Russian nuclear modernization programs continued apace, despite official expectations of an inaction-inaction interaction. Moscow continued to develop new types of strategic and non-strategic nuclear systems, considered the United States and its NATO allies the greatest threat to the Russian

<https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/06/02/world/europe/ap-eu-russia-nuclear-policy.html>.

¹⁰³ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Moscow Clarifies Its Nuclear Deterrence Policy,” *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 80 (June 4, 2020), available at <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-clarifies-its-nuclear-deterrence-policy/>.

Federation, and spoke openly about the preemptive use of nuclear weapons.

Regrettably, the U.S. desire to set an example of restraint in nuclear developments for Russia to follow proved entirely unsuccessful. U.S. and Russian nuclear policies diverged significantly. While the United States sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy and to avoid an arms race, Russia continued its nuclear buildup. Neither the narrative that the United States was responsible for prompting Russia to adopt the course it took, nor the belief that U.S. restraint would be matched by Russia, or others, are supported by the historical record.

Moving Toward Nuclear Modernization in the Wake of a Return to Great Power Competition

Today, the United States and the Russian Federation appear far apart in their respective approaches to nuclear weapons. As noted previously, the United States deferred strategic modernization decisions, discounted the threat posed by Russia, decreased the size of its nuclear arsenal, stopped explosive nuclear weapons testing, and de-emphasized the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy. By contrast, Russia moved in the opposite direction—increasing its nuclear arsenal, threatening neighbors with nuclear strikes, talking openly about the possibility of preemptive nuclear use, and accelerating the development of new and more sophisticated offensive nuclear weapons systems.

This reality was officially recognized by the Trump Administration in its 2017 *National Security Strategy* and its

2018 *National Defense Strategy*, both of which declared the re-emergence of great power competition (i.e., China and Russia) to be the greatest security threat to the United States. In February 2018, the Department of Defense released its *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR). The NPR acknowledged Russia's reversion in recent years to a more aggressive nuclear stance.

As a consequence, the Trump Administration's NPR proceeded with the strategic modernization program first established by the Obama Administration, while supplementing it with two additional nuclear capabilities – deployment of a low-yield ballistic missile warhead in the near term and development of a new nuclear sea-launched cruise missile in the longer term. According to the administration, these supplemental capabilities “will enhance deterrence by denying potential adversaries any mistaken confidence that limited nuclear employment can provide a useful advantage over the United States and its allies.”¹⁰⁴

Critics of the administration's plan said it “will make the use of nuclear weapons more likely and undercut US security,” arguing that it demonstrates the United States is “preparing for nuclear war-fighting.”¹⁰⁵ For its part, Russia has continued with its own nuclear modernization programs begun over a decade ago. In early 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced with great fanfare that Moscow is developing at least five new sophisticated

¹⁰⁴ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, p. XI, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

¹⁰⁵ See for example, Lizbeth Gronlund, *Trump's Nuclear Posture Review: Top Take-Aways*, Union of Concerned Scientists, February 2, 2018, available at <https://allthingsnuclear.org/lgronlund/trumps-npr-top-take-aways>.

nuclear weapons delivery systems intended to counter U.S. military advantages, including U.S. missile defenses, accusing the United States of seeking to counter those weapons that "form the backbone of our nuclear deterrence forces."¹⁰⁶ Russian nuclear weapons programs have proceeded apace under an aggressive modernization effort that has included the building and deployment of new nuclear strike capabilities, both "strategic" and "theater." China, too, is engaging in an expansion of its nuclear capabilities.

Domestic critics of the Trump Administration's nuclear policies have echoed Moscow's assertions that Russian strategic developments are a response to U.S. missile defense programs in the absence of the ABM Treaty. For example, in a remarkable echo of what former UN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick described as a "blame America first" mentality, one critic recently argued, "Back then, U.S. experts (and Russia) warned that the consequences of killing the ABM Treaty would be a buildup of new Russian nuclear forces. And what we see now in Russia is exactly that: the development of a range of novel systems such as new heavy land-based missiles, nuclear-powered cruise missiles, and nuclear-tipped long-range torpedoes."¹⁰⁷ Some have characterized this as evidence of a renewed action-reaction dynamic, with the U.S. action (ABM Treaty withdrawal) instigating Russia's reaction (new strategic programs). Several analysts have warned of a spiraling arms race as a result.

¹⁰⁶ Vladimir Putin, *Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly*, March 1, 2018, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.

¹⁰⁷ Jon B. Wolfsthal, "Forget the Book. Bolton's Legacy Is a Nuclear Arms Race," *Foreign Policy*, June 24, 2020, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/24/john-bolton-book-trump-nuclear-arms-race-russia-iran-north-korea/>.

This is a convenient and now-familiar argument for those seeking to hold the United States responsible for Russian behavior; it is based on the proposition that absent U.S. ABM Treaty withdrawal and limited missile defense deployment, Russia would not have proceeded with its contemporary buildup of offensive nuclear programs, i.e., U.S. culpability. This continuing type of criticism is identical to the arguments made in the 1960s and 1970s against U.S. strategic missile defense and is based on the familiar action-reaction and inaction-inaction narrative. It ignores the reality that Russian behavior has its own dynamics and is not simply reactive to U.S. first actions. It has been refuted by two former U.S. officials in the Obama Administration who noted that Russia's extensive nuclear arms buildup over the past fifteen years was "not because of the United States."¹⁰⁸ The historical chronology of these developments clearly supports their point.

Russian President Putin said at the time that the U.S. 2002 withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was "mistaken," but that Russia had the capability to counter U.S. missile defenses and, "Therefore I fully believe that the decision taken by the president of the United States does not pose a threat to the national security of the Russian Federation."¹⁰⁹ In fact, as Amb. Robert Joseph noted in an interview, while the conclusion of the ABM Treaty in 1972 led to the largest

¹⁰⁸ Peter Rough and Frank A. Rose, "Why Germany's nuclear mission matters," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, translated by Brookings Institution, June 9, 2020, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/09/why-germanys-nuclear-mission-matters/>.

¹⁰⁹ "Statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin Regarding the Decision of the Administration of the United States of America to Withdraw from the Antiballistic Missile Treaty of 1972," December 13, 2001, available at <https://russianlife.com/stories/online/putin-abm-withdrawal/>.

Soviet strategic nuclear buildup in history – contrary to the predictions of its supporters who believed U.S. inaction on strategic defenses would be matched by Soviet inaction on strategic offenses – the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty 30 years later coincided with an agreed *decrease* in Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal.¹¹⁰ Indeed, as noted above, the United States and Russia established a new legally binding strategic nuclear arms control agreement at the time, i.e., the 2002 Moscow Treaty, in which they agreed to deep reductions below the previous START agreement, including a ceiling of 1700-2200 on operationally deployed weapons. As Putin stated at the time: "a particularly important task... is putting a legal seal on the achieved agreements on further radical, irreversible and verifiable cuts of strategic offensive weapons..."¹¹¹

In the area of arms control, critics of the Trump Administration also argued that the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty, the announced withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty, and the failure extend the New START Treaty, heralded the start of a new arms race with Russia. For example, one analysis stated, "With the collapse of the INF Treaty, the U.S. and Russia are now free to build and deploy this category of weapons, which would fall in line with their seeming determination to kick-start a new nuclear arms race."¹¹² This charge fails to acknowledge that Russia alone

¹¹⁰ Telephone interview conducted on May 7, 2020.

¹¹¹ "Statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin Regarding the Decision of the Administration of the United States of America to Withdraw from the Antibalistic Missile Treaty of 1972," op. cit.

¹¹² *The INF Treaty's definitive collapse: dawn of a new nuclear arms race?*, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, August 2, 2019, available at https://www.icanw.org/the_inf_treaty_s_definitive_collapse_dawn_of_a_new_nuclear_arms_race.

has been in material violation of the INF Treaty by deploying “this category of weapons” for years—which was the expressed reason for U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty. Again, those who employ the action-reaction critique of U.S. behavior appear to regard opponents as benign cogs caught in a U.S.-led action-reaction dynamic.

The notion that the United States is culpable for initiating a new spiral in the arms race stands reality on its head. U.S. actions—both in its nuclear programs and in its arms control approach—*were precipitated* by prior Russian offensive program activities and behavior, including Russian violations of numerous arms control agreements. Ironically, the United States is now being pressed by critics to pursue a policy of inaction in the expectation that this will lead to Russian inaction—when in reality it was largely Russian arms control non-compliance that led the United States to respond, now and in the past. The critics’ arguments suggesting that it is now incumbent upon the United States to prevent an arms race by failing to address Russian nuclear and arms control misbehavior not only lack historical credibility but reflect outdated Cold War thinking about the action-reaction arms race that was as demonstrably wrong and misleading then as it is today.

The action-reaction arms race metaphor has also been applied by critics to argue against U.S. actions perceived as inconsistent with other arms control obligations or political commitments. For example, speculation about the potential U.S. resumption of nuclear testing under the Trump Administration prompted one analyst to comment that such an action “won’t just encourage Russia to test again; it will ensure that China, India and Pakistan resume testing too—

and the world will be in far greater danger."¹¹³ (In fact, the U.S. cessation of nuclear testing in 1992 did not dissuade China, India, or Pakistan from conducting their own nuclear tests subsequently.) Similarly, another critic argued that a resumption of U.S. nuclear testing would send a "signal" to other countries, "forcing them to do the same thing."¹¹⁴ A former administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration argued that a resumption of U.S. nuclear testing would give "a green light to other countries, including dangerous proliferators, to conduct nuclear tests of their own."¹¹⁵ This was echoed by another commentator who predicted that U.S. nuclear testing would "likely trigger nuclear testing by other states, and set off a new nuclear arms race in which everyone would come out a loser."¹¹⁶

The Trump Administration, of course, did not renew U.S. nuclear testing, and such comments ignore, as noted above, that while the United States has abided by its commitment to a nuclear test moratorium, Russia has engaged in "supercritical" nuclear experiments. Russia appears to be culpable of doing precisely that which critics

¹¹³ Scott Sagan, cited in Doyle McManus, "A bad move on nuclear arms: Trump's escalation plan is reckless, dangerous and unnecessary," *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 2020, available at https://enewspaper.latimes.com/infinity/article_share.aspx?guid=c8c11908-dfd2-4047-9c67-f4b3094203ad.

¹¹⁴ Kyle Mizokami, "America Should Never Conduct Another Nuclear Test," *Popular Mechanics*, May 27, 2020, available at <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/weapons/a32676737/us-nuclear-tests/>.

¹¹⁵ William Courtney and Frank Klotz, "Should the U.S. Really Be Testing Nukes Now?," *Newsweek*, June 10, 2020, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/nuclear-tests-america-trump-now-1509868>.

¹¹⁶ Kimball, "Nuclear Arms Control, or a New Arms Race? Trump Seems Bent on the Latter," *op. cit.*

accused the United States of prospectively doing. Yet, no such criticism is applied to Moscow. As in the past, the action-reaction narrative seems employed only to identify the United States as the instigator of arms racing.

What all of these criticisms have in common is a belief, driven by the action-reaction presumption, that it is the United States that is responsible for creating an arms race and the corollary inaction-inaction presumption that the United States can change the behavior of others by stopping its actions. Again, opponents are presumed to be benign cogs caught in a mechanistic action-reaction dynamic driven by the United States. For example, in a nod to the belief that the United States should set an example for the rest of the world in an effort to shape the decision making of other countries, former Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn and former Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz stated that “the United States should be leading the international community, cooperating with allies, and avoiding actions that could further destabilize the international environment.”¹¹⁷ While seeking cooperation and avoiding destabilizing behavior are indeed proper U.S. goals, the action-reaction and inaction-inaction narratives provide guidance to those ends that is more misleading than enlightening.

In the context of an emerging great power competition that includes extensive Russian and Chinese nuclear and conventional force buildups, aggressive revisionist behaviors, and explicit nuclear threats to the U.S. and allies, the Obama Administration initiated a comprehensive nuclear modernization program. It was largely adopted by

¹¹⁷ *Statement from Ernest J. Moniz and Sam Nunn on U.S. Withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty*, Nuclear Threat Initiative, May 22, 2020, available at <https://www.nti.org/newsroom/news/statement-ernest-j-moniz-and-sam-nunn-us-withdrawal-open-skies-treaty/>.

the Trump Administration, along with the addition of two modest supplemental nuclear capabilities. This is the first comprehensive U.S. nuclear modernization program since the Reagan build-up of the 1980's. In this contemporary threat context, both Russian and Chinese nuclear programs and geopolitical expansionism appear to play prominently in the renewed bipartisan U.S. threat perceptions that are driving U.S. nuclear modernization plans.

Nevertheless, in accord with Cold War action-reaction assertions, critics now contend that it is these late U.S. nuclear programs that will cause an arms race by prompting others to move forward with their own nuclear programs, i.e., U.S. culpability. The corollary argument, as usual, is that if the United States would now refrain from acting, opponents would do likewise, i.e., inaction-inaction. However, the historical evidence again demonstrates that U.S. behavior did not cause Russian or Chinese nuclear and conventional force expansions. Rather, they are a reflection of Russian and Chinese internally driven, revisionist geopolitical goals and their strategies to support those goals. The Obama and Trump Administrations' nuclear programs clearly were a reaction to the Russian and Chinese developments following years of U.S. quiescence. None of the oral history participants interviewed in connection with this analysis subscribed to the action-reaction critique of contemporary U.S. actions because it is so manifestly inconsistent with historical trends.

Russia has attempted to link its new strategic programs with U.S. missile defense activities; yet, as noted above, this primarily appears to be part of Moscow's campaign to undermine U.S. programs and not the result of an action-reaction dynamic led by the United States. Domestic critics of U.S. policy have also predicted that because of U.S. withdrawal from arms control agreements previously

reached, the world will become more dangerous as opponents now feel free to develop or proceed with their own nuclear programs, including conducting nuclear tests and developing new nuclear weapons and delivery systems. However, opponents have been pursuing these behaviors in violation of agreements for many years—U.S. withdrawal from agreements under the Trump Administration was a response to their lack of compliance integrity.

The action-reaction argument of the 1960s continues to be employed today to assert U.S. culpability via the counterfactual proposition that the actions of others are benign, defensive responses to prior unnecessary U.S. actions. As in the past, this frequent charge essentially ignores the unique security considerations that are the primary factors that drive the decision-making calculus of the United States and other states. Tellingly, it is the critics of U.S. policy employing the action-reaction argument who remain mired in this Cold War thinking.

In general, despite the pervasive notion in the arms control and disarmament community that the United States is driving others into a dangerous arms race in which there can be “no winners,” and that U.S. inaction will inspire opponents’ inaction, such projections are contrary to historical evidence and appear to be based on a set of presumptions derived from Cold War thinking that contradicts the historical record and that all of the oral history participants in this study have criticized as inaccurate and false.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The inflection points in U.S. strategic policy and force acquisition programs have followed from various triggers over decades, including: the continuous expansion of Soviet nuclear and conventional capabilities; aggressive Soviet geopolitical moves; the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War; the subsequent proliferation of advanced technology; and, a return of great power competition that includes increasingly explicit nuclear threats to the United States and allies. These developments have led the United States to reassess its strategic policies and force postures to sustain basic deterrence goals that have received bipartisan support and remained consistent over decades.

In many cases, developments in foreign nuclear policies and postures led U.S. policymakers to re-examine American nuclear policies and capabilities in an effort to preserve the credible functioning of deterrence, including extended deterrence. Other cases, including the Reagan SDI program and the subsequent U.S. deployment of limited homeland defense capabilities, reflected attempted revisions in U.S. policy priorities or a change in threats to the United States.

This analysis shows that the major changes, or inflection points, in U.S. policy from the end of the 1960s to the present day were accompanied by assertions that U.S. actions would start an arms race and make the world more dangerous, and that if the United States refrained from taking actions, i.e., inaction, others would follow suit. What this analysis demonstrates, however, is that neither prediction is consistent with the historical evidence. (A summary of the findings is shown in the below chart.)

Assertions and Facts Regarding the “U.S.-Led Action-Reaction Arms Race” Narrative	
Action-Reaction Arms Race Assertions	Facts
1960s-Present. Arms races are the result of U.S. actions that compel adversary reactions in response and instigate a U.S.-led “action-reaction arms race.” Correspondingly, U.S. restraint (inaction) allows adversaries to avoid responsive armament, thus creating an inaction-inaction dynamic and precluding arms racing. U.S. action or inaction is the key factor in causing or preventing the arms race.	Adversary actions and armament decisions are determined by a variety of unique national considerations that reflect a multitude of strategic, cultural, geo-political, and other factors; they are not simply mechanistic reactions to U.S. action or inaction. Adversary armament decisions often are not in reaction to prior U.S. behavior nor will they necessarily be precluded by U.S. inaction.
Late 1960s-1972. The U.S. deployment of strategic missile defense will intensify the arms race and preclude arms control. In contrast, U.S. accession to the 1972 ABM Treaty will preclude both a Soviet nuclear offensive buildup and an arms race.	The greatest increase in Soviet nuclear offensive arms occurred <i>after</i> the signing of the ABM Treaty, along with continuing upgrades to the deployed Soviet nuclear-armed ABM system.
1974. The U.S. 1974 “Schlesinger Doctrine” (NSDM-242) and related development of Limited Nuclear Options (LNOs) is another unnecessary, destabilizing U.S. nuclear initiative that will force the Soviets to respond with additional nuclear capabilities and thus cause an escalation of the arms race.	The Schlesinger Doctrine was not a cause of the continuing Soviet nuclear expansion, but a U.S. response to that expansion. It was a policy shift intended to preserve deterrence stability, particularly extended deterrence for allies, in the face of the continuing expansion of Soviet nuclear capabilities. As part of the Schlesinger Doctrine, the United States continued to deliberately restrain the number and types of its nuclear capabilities.

Action-Reaction Arms Race Assertions	Facts
<p>1980. The U.S. 1980 "Countervailing Strategy" (PD-59) is another unnecessary, destabilizing U.S. nuclear initiative that will force the Soviets to respond with additional nuclear capabilities and thus cause an escalation of the arms race.</p>	<p>The Countervailing Strategy was not a cause of the continuing Soviet nuclear expansion, but a consequence of that continuing expansion. It sought to ensure the continuing credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent and extended deterrent. While the Soviets sought to attain a strategic advantage over the United States, the United States did not deploy comparable offensive or defensive capabilities.</p>
<p>1980s. The U.S. strategic nuclear buildup of the late Carter and Reagan Administrations is an unnecessary, destabilizing U.S. nuclear initiative that will force the Soviets to respond with additional nuclear capabilities and thus cause an escalation of the arms race.</p>	<p>The U.S. 1980s strategic modernization program was not a cause of the continuing Soviet nuclear expansion, but a consequence of that continuing expansion. The Carter and Reagan Administrations intended to bolster deterrence and ensure the survivability of U.S. retaliatory forces in light of Soviet strategic expansion. U.S. responses were <i>restrained</i> and <i>moderate</i> compared to Soviet efforts to attain strategic advantages for their own purposes.</p>
<p>Mid-1980s. U.S. deployment of INF systems in Europe is unwanted by European allies, will compel a Soviet armaments response, undermine arms control, and spark an arms race as the Soviet Union deploys more INF systems, like the SS-20.</p>	<p>U.S. deployment of INF in Europe was invited by European allies, a response to <i>the prior</i> Soviet deployment of hundreds of new INF systems and intended to preserve extended deterrence for NATO. It ultimately led to the 1987 INF Treaty that eliminated an entire class of delivery systems, including the Soviet SS-20.</p>

Action-Reaction Arms Race Assertions	Facts
<p>Early-mid 1980s. The U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) will destabilize deterrence, compel the Soviet Union to respond with offensive armaments, preclude arms control, bankrupt the U.S. economy, intensify the arms race, and extend it to the "heavens." Ceasing the SDI will facilitate arms control.</p>	<p>The SDI was a <i>defensive</i> response to the unceasing Soviet strategic offensive buildup on-going since the 1960s. Its scaling back neither halted nor curbed the continuing Soviet build-up of offensive nuclear forces nor the continuing modernization of Soviet nuclear-armed missile defense forces. But the SDI's technological promise forced the Soviet Union to make trade-offs that led to reforms that contributed to the USSR's ultimate demise.</p>
<p>2002. U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty will compel Russia and others to increase their strategic offensive and defensive forces, result in a renewed arms race, and destroy chances for further arms control agreements.</p>	<p>The U.S. withdrawal from the ABM did not cause renewed arms racing. In fact, Russian President Putin said publicly at the time that U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty did not constitute a threat to Russia, and the largest negotiated reduction of deployed strategic nuclear weapons in history coincided with the <i>U.S. withdrawal</i> and the announced deployment of an initial U.S. missile defense system.</p>
<p>Early 1990s-Present. U.S. strategic restraint (e.g., reductions, deferral of nuclear modernization, cessation of nuclear testing, etc.) will set an "example" that others will follow, including the potential for the global elimination of nuclear weapons. <i>These assertions are an extension of the expected inaction-inaction dynamic to be led by U.S. example.</i></p>	<p>From early in the post-Cold War period, neither Russia nor China followed the U.S. lead toward reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons. In fact, Russian and Chinese strategic modernization accelerated, and their respective doctrines appear to have placed increasing importance on nuclear capabilities for deterrence and coercive purposes. During this period, North Korea developed, tested and deployed nuclear weapons. In addition, despite the end of U.S. nuclear testing in 1992, Russia reportedly has surreptitiously conducted nuclear tests that produce yield, and Chinese activities have sparked concern over its compliance with the "zero yield" testing standard.</p>

Action-Reaction Arms Race Assertions	Facts
<p>2010-Present. The U.S. nuclear modernization program initiated by the Obama Administration and sustained by the Trump Administration is unnecessary, destabilizing and will lead to an unconstrained arms race. <i>These assertions are an extension of the action-reaction critique of U.S. programs that originated in the 1960s.</i></p>	<p>The U.S. strategic modernization program is the first such comprehensive effort since the 1980s. It is intended to restore the U.S. nuclear infrastructure that has atrophied significantly since the end of the Cold War and sustain rapidly aging U.S. deterrence capabilities in the face of the continuing Russian, Chinese and North Korean nuclear buildups – which preceded the planned U.S. modernization program. The U.S. program will not increase the number of U.S. nuclear forces and is intended to demonstrate restraint. In the context of the U.S. modernization program, the United States and Russia resumed arms control talks.</p>

In contrast to the many assertions of the action-reaction narrative, during the period examined, the United States has not been the first cause driver of an arms race, nor has U.S. restraint in nuclear developments been reciprocated by others. The popular narrative of an action-reaction arms race dynamic led by the United States lacks integrity, yet it continues to be voiced without restraint as if it is a “law” of international relations. As journalist Walter Pincus wrote in 1999, “Whatever the United States does, wherever its presence is felt, its actions don’t occur in a vacuum. In the world of missiles, missile defenses, nuclear physics and nuclear politics, action-reaction is still the norm.”¹¹⁸

The narrative of a “mindless” action-reaction arms race is not a new phenomenon. Nor did it originate with the emergence of the nuclear era and the start of the Cold War. Predictions of a mechanistic action-reaction dynamic pre-date recent history and are reflected in arguments over

¹¹⁸ Walter Pincus, “First Law of Nuclear Politics: Every Action Brings Reaction,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 1999, p. B2.

armaments building that date back centuries. For example, in the early 1900s, Great Britain, the world's preeminent naval power, was challenged for naval dominance by Germany, France, and Russia. Germany, in particular, was on a course to supplant Britain as a dominant naval power, launching a program to build dozens of battleships. By 1902, British experts had concluded that "we have lost our [naval] superiority and are distinctly dropping to the rear."¹¹⁹ The British government debated whether to build a faster vessel—the *Dreadnought*—and how many. Yet, many in Britain sought to avoid an arms race with Germany and argued against building more *Dreadnoughts*. As one authoritative account explained:

There remained a sizable sentiment [in Britain] for reducing armaments.... In 1905 Britain had built four ships to Germany's two. When Britain decreased her program in 1906, Germany increased. In 1907 Britain further decreased her program while Germany increased once again. It took some British a little longer, but eventually most began to get the message.¹²⁰

Those who saw danger in Germany's buildup were accused of "naval scare-mongering," with one British Cabinet member calling it the "diseased imagination of inferior minds."¹²¹ However, as one historian recounted, the British "did not start the naval race: the Germans did in 1898." As another historian noted, "The British soon realized that it was useless to try to turn Germany aside

¹¹⁹ Cited in Kenneth L. Moll, "Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain's 1909 Dreadnought 'Gap'," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 21 (Fall 1965), p. 431.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

¹²¹ Quoted in, Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, Volume I: The Road to War, 1904–1914* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1961), cited in *ibid.*, p. 438.

from its purpose by abstaining from countermeasures. Reluctance to do so would obviously be taken only as weakness."¹²² Clearly, Britain's desire to avoid an arms race with Germany by scaling back its own naval building plans went unreciprocated – another example of the fallacy of the inaction-inaction argument. A few short years later, World War I began.

This British-German example demonstrates that arms races are not mechanistic processes where the actions of one party result predictably in similar actions by another party. Armament decisions are based on a multitude of factors that drive the decisions of states, including unique historical, cultural, economic, and leadership characteristics. Britain's experience in the early 1900s is reminiscent of Harold Brown's statement when asked about Soviet activities: "When we build, they build; when we cut, they build."

During the years examined here, U.S. action or inaction frequently was followed by adversary behavior that was precisely the opposite of what proponents of the action-reaction theory of arms racing predicted, including U.S. action that led to Soviet inaction, and U.S. inaction that led to Soviet action. For example, Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) – even though it was never fully realized – convinced Russia that the United States enjoyed a level of technological superiority that Moscow was unable to match and, as a number of oral history participants noted, helped bring about the end of the Cold War by forcing the USSR to adopt various economic and political changes that ultimately led to the Soviet Union's collapse. And, despite criticism based on the action-reaction metaphor, George W. Bush's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and move to deploy limited missile defenses against rogue state missile threats coincided with an arms control treaty sought by

¹²² Leonard Wainstein, "The Dreadnought Gap," in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, eds., *The Use of Force: International Politics and Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), p. 154.

Russia, the Moscow Treaty. It mandated the deepest reductions in strategic offensive nuclear arsenals of any such agreement. In other cases, U.S. inaction encouraged adversary actions, such as when the United States ceased deployment of strategic missile defenses under the ABM Treaty, thereby creating an opportunity (as stated explicitly by Soviet senior military leadership) for the Soviet Union to channel resources into the expansion of Soviet ICBM capabilities. The critics' action-reaction based prediction was that U.S. agreement to the ABM Treaty would instead render a continuing Soviet buildup in offensive nuclear capabilities unnecessary.

Clearly, there have been interactions in U.S and Soviet (and subsequently, Russian) armament programs. Yet, in no case examined here does it appear that the United States has been the lead cause of an action-reaction arms race. The United States has focused on preserving its capacity for deterrence and extended deterrence in the face of rapidly expanding Soviet and more recently Russian strategic nuclear capabilities, theater nuclear, and conventional capabilities, and an aggressive, expansionist, anti-American foreign policy. And in the cases of the 1983 SDI and 2002 missile defense initiative, U.S. actions were not followed by the reactions predicted by critics based on the action-reaction metaphor.

While the United States believed that strategic nuclear "parity" with the Soviet Union would lead to a satisfied Soviet Union and its quiescence, the Soviets sought to attain a position of relative superiority over the United States in the area of nuclear capability, particularly in hard target counterforce capability. And, in contrast to much U.S. behavior, the Soviets also actively sought strategic force advantages that would allow them to fight and prevail in a nuclear war should deterrence fail. Nuclear developments on both sides can be attributed to interactions based more

on these different perceptions and motivations than to the presumed mechanistic action-reaction dynamic.

Unlike the United States, which placed a premium on "stable" deterrence of nuclear attack through mutual possession of a credible, second-strike retaliatory capability, the Soviet approach to strategic doctrine placed a premium on developing and deploying counterforce nuclear capabilities comprehensively to target U.S. retaliatory forces and various defensive capabilities to limit damage from potential U.S. retaliatory strikes. The Soviet and U.S. approaches to their respective nuclear force postures reflected their divergence of views on the primary utility of nuclear weapons: their armament programs were driven by the requirements that corresponded to their divergent goals, not by an action-reaction dynamic associated with mutual adherence to a "stable" balance of terror. A presumption of the latter was the basic fallacy of the simplistic action-reaction arms racing paradigm. As a Joint Net Assessment concluded:

These fundamental differences between U.S. and Soviet strategic thought are reflected in the asymmetric force postures of the two sides. Because the Soviets regard nuclear war as a continuing possibility and have rejected mutual vulnerability as a desirable or permanent basis for the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship, they seek superior capabilities to fight and win a nuclear war with the United States and have been working to improve their chances of prevailing in such a conflict.¹²³

¹²³ Secretary of Defense and Director of Central Intelligence, *US and Soviet Strategic Forces*, Joint Net Assessment, November 14, 1983, p. 8, available at

The Soviets developed and deployed a range of counterforce systems, including the large, heavily-MIRVed SS-18 ICBM, which correspondingly created a growing asymmetry in prompt counterforce capabilities. As the Department of Defense concluded: “The Soviets recognize the catastrophic consequences of global nuclear war. Nonetheless, they seek to survive and prevail in such a conflict.”¹²⁴ And:

If a war escalates to the nuclear level, Soviet doctrine calls for the massive use of nuclear weapons to preempt an imminent, large-scale enemy attack.... Following nuclear exchanges, the Soviets anticipate that combat at all levels would continue, possibly for a protracted period.¹²⁵

If the expectation of an action-reaction arms race now leads to limits on U.S. strategic missile defenses--as occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, e.g., the 1972 ABM Treaty—there will likely be a significant trade-off that the United States did not face in the 1960s and 1970s. The dilemma the United States will face is whether to expand its strategic missile defense capabilities to keep pace with rogue threats, or, in the expectation of an action-reaction dynamic, to reimpose limits on its strategic missile defense. As rogue strategic missile capabilities expand and mature,

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB428/docs/1.US%20and%20Soviet%20Strategic%20Forces%20Joint%20Net%20Assessment.pdf>

¹²⁴ Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power*, March 1987, p. 15, available at

<http://insidethecoldwar.org/sites/default/files/documents/DoD%20-%20Soviet%20Military%20Power%201987.pdf>.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

limiting U.S. strategic missile defense now for fear of an action-reaction dynamic with Russia will likely leave the U.S. vulnerable to rogue missile strikes. The question the United States will likely face is whether a possible action-reaction dynamic with great powers or acquiescing to vulnerability to rogue missile attack is the priority security concern.

This *Occasional Paper* builds on the outstanding arms race analyses of Colin Gray and Albert Wohlstetter from the 1970s. It concludes that in light of historical developments, arguments about the United States initiating or driving an arms race by virtue of its own nuclear modernization programs are not only wrong but reflect an ideological predisposition to posit U.S. culpability for arms racing. Assertions have remained constant over decades that U.S. nuclear weapons programs are the cause of arms racing and that U.S. restraint will be followed by opponent restraint. These assertions appear largely to be politically inspired speculation contrary to available empirical evidence. Moreover, implicit in the U.S.-led action-reaction arms race theory is an assumption that other governments simply react to U.S. developments in predictable ways. The belief that the United States sets the scope, pace, and direction of others' armament activities, and that the power of U.S. strategic restraint will guide others similarly, reflects a form of cultural arrogance that is unsupported by the historical record.

At least for the United States, the metrics for judging whether the United States is "racing" all suggest the opposite. While Russia, China, and North Korea have been pursuing nuclear building programs for two decades, the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. stockpile today stands at its lowest level since the mid-1950s. The United States has not built a new nuclear weapon in decades and has not tested a nuclear weapon explosively in more than a quarter century. The level of investment in U.S. nuclear

forces is at historical lows and will remain a single digit percentage of the overall U.S. defense budget even when the current modernization program reaches its peak. And the United States continues to focus on the development of advanced conventional weapons technologies in support of the goal of reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy. None of these developments are consistent with the publicly espoused notion of U.S.-led “arms racing.”

As the issue of U.S. nuclear policy and programs continues to generate controversy, it is important to ensure that the public debate is informed by facts and data, not politically driven speculation and posturing derived from a Cold War narrative. Recent assertions that the United States is “jumpstarting the 21st century arms race” because “arms races are good for business”¹²⁶ are not only polemical and inaccurate, but are dismissive of the complex dynamics of international relations that govern a state’s armaments behavior—dynamics which were expertly explained by Colin Gray in the 1970s.¹²⁷ The goal of this report is to help contribute to an informed public debate, presenting the historical record and applying the lessons of history to contemporary circumstances. Understanding the reasons behind historical trends and drivers of U.S. actions is a necessary prerequisite for the development of sound policy today.

It is ironic that even today, despite repeated evidence to the contrary, critics of current-day nuclear modernization programs cite the same time-worn and inaccurate U.S.-led action-reaction and inaction-inaction arguments that were

¹²⁶ Matt Korda, “The Trump Administration Is Using The Pandemic To Ignite The Arms Race,” *Forbes*, June 22, 2020, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewkorda/2020/06/22/the-trump-administration-is-using-the-pandemic-to-ignite-the-arms-race/#17e513f53dc9>.

¹²⁷ See for example, Gray, *The Soviet-American Arms Race*, op. cit.

advanced by those opposed to U.S. strategic offensive and defensive programs in every decade since the 1960s.

It is unlikely that the historical evidence presented here will end the promulgation of the simplistic and discredited action-reaction arms race narrative by those who seek to move the United States away from nuclear deterrence and strategic defense capabilities altogether. As an oral history participant noted with regard to the action-reaction metaphor, those who propagate it seem "impervious to data."¹²⁸

Hopefully, however, this study will contribute to the understanding of those who seek a discussion of nuclear weapons policies and programs that is informed by the lessons of history. We owe this to ourselves and to future generations that are unlikely to step out of the nuclear shadow.

¹²⁸ Telephone interview with John Rood, conducted on April 23, 2020.

Appendix

List of “Oral History” Interviews

- *Fritz Ermarth, former Chairman of the National Intelligence Council and staff of the National Security Council during the Carter and Reagan Administrations*
- *The Hon. Douglas J. Feith, Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Negotiations Policy*
- *The Hon. William R. Graham, former Chairman of the EMP Commission and former Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy during the Reagan Administration*
- *Dr. John Harvey, former Principal Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Defense Programs; Director, Policy Planning Staff of the National Nuclear Security Administration during the H. W. Bush Administration*
- *Amb. Robert G. Joseph, Former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, former U.S. Commissioner to the Standing Consultative Commission*
- *Amb. Ron Lehman, Counselor to the Director, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory; Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency from 1989 to 1993*
- *The Hon. Franklin Miller, Principal, Scowcroft Group; former Special Assistant to President George W. Bush; Senior Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control, National Security Council; former senior OSD/Policy official for over two decades*
- *The Hon. James Miller, Senior Fellow, Belfer Center for Science & International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School; former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy during the Obama Administration*

Interviewees provided their recollections of events for the study that served as the basis for this *Occasional Paper*. The findings in this *Occasional Paper* do not necessarily reflect their views. The views expressed in this *Occasional Paper* are the authors' alone and do not represent any institution with which they are or have been affiliated.

- *The Hon. Richard Perle, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy during the Reagan Administration; Former Senior Staff Member to Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson*
- *The Hon. John C. Rood, Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Acting Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, and Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation*
- *The Hon. Frank Rose, Senior Fellow for Security and Strategy, Brookings Institution; Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance during the Obama Administration*
- *Dr. Mark B. Schneider, Former DoD Principal Director for Forces Policy, former Principal Director for Strategic Defense, Space and Verification Policy, and former Director for Strategic Arms Control Policy.*
- *The Hon. William Schneider, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute and Member, Defense Science Board; former Chairman of the Defense Science Board, and Under Secretary of State*
- *Dr. Richard Wagner, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Atomic Energy during the Reagan Administration*

About the Authors

Hon. David J. Trachtenberg has worked in the national security area for more than four decades, both in the private sector and in government. Confirmed by the U.S. Senate in 2017, he was the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Trump Administration. He also served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy in the George W. Bush Administration and as a Professional Staff Member on the House Armed Services Committee. Currently, he is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy, a nonprofit research center in Fairfax, Virginia. His is the author of *The Lawgivers' Struggle: How Congress Wields Power in National Security Decision Making*, National Institute Press, 2020.

Dr. Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. Prior, Dr. Dodge worked at The Heritage Foundation from 2010 to 2019 and served as a Senior Defense Policy Advisor for Senator Jon Kyl from Arizona from October to December 2018. Dr. Dodge's work focuses on U.S. nuclear weapons and missile defense policy, nuclear forces modernization, deterrence and assurance, and arms control. Dr. Dodge received a Ph.D. from George Mason University in 2019. She is the author of numerous articles and *U.S. Czech Missile Defense Cooperation: Alliance Politics in Action*, National Institute Press, 2020.

Dr. Keith B. Payne is co-Founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, a nonprofit research center located in Fairfax, Virginia and professor emeritus, Missouri State University. Dr. Payne has served in the Department of Defense as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy and as a Senior Advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). He received the Distinguished Public Service Medal and the OSD Award for Outstanding Achievement. In 2005, he was awarded the Vicennial Medal from Georgetown University for his many

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