



PROCEEDINGS

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

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “The ‘Action-Reaction’ Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on March 29, 2021. The symposium was the occasion for the public rollout of a new National Institute study on the topic. The study is available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>. An abbreviated version of the study was published as an Occasional Paper and is available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/OP-6-final.pdf>.

Keith B. Payne

Keith B. Payne is a co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, professor emeritus of the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University and a former deputy assistant secretary of defense.

I am very happy to welcome you all here to this online symposium, and to provide a few opening remarks.

Today we have a wonderful set of speakers to discuss a 200-page National Institute study completed in 2020 and approved for release by DoD in February. The study was extremely well led by my colleague Dave Trachtenberg, with substantial contributions to the text by Michaela Dodge and me, and a very useful, bipartisan oral history section.

Many thanks to all who participated in that oral history, and to the Smith Richardson and Scaife Foundations for making this study possible. A PDF copy will be emailed to all who have joined us today.

This study consciously builds on and updates the outstanding and original work done by Albert Wohlstetter and Colin Gray in the 1970s—work that unfortunately seems largely to have been forgotten at this point.

Our speakers will go into some detail regarding the findings from this study; I will take a few minutes to provide a brief synopsis.

The focus of the study is on the “action-reaction” narrative regarding arms racing, and how it typically is used to argue against U.S. policy and force posture initiatives. In short, critics of U.S. arms and policies virtually always claim that U.S. arms programs are both unnecessary and will be the trigger for opponents’ arms racing reactions--hence there is U.S. culpability for the arms race. This is the “action-reaction” narrative.



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The corollary of this narrative is the policy line that if only the United States would stop its nuclear programs, opponents would likewise stop their nuclear building programs. U.S. *inaction* supposedly will trigger opponents' *inaction*.

Why so? Opponents will stop arming because they deploy nuclear weapons only to deter us. When we stop threatening opponents by building nuclear arms, they supposedly will relax and stop building themselves—they will no longer need to build to preserve their deterrent. Just as our *actions* supposedly drive their *reactions* and the arms race, our *inaction* will lead to their *inaction*.

Note that this action-reaction narrative portrays opponents as benign cogs caught in an arms race dynamic driven by the United States. Consequently, the solution to arms racing is obvious: the United States must stop the arms race by first stopping its own programs; opponents will then similarly stand down. In short, it is the U.S. responsibility to replace action-reaction arms racing cycles with inaction-inaction. Doing so, it was said in the 1960s, would replace the “arms race” with a “peace race.”

It is hard to imagine a more simplistic, reductionist explanation of the arms race and its solution. But this narrative has been extremely useful politically. The obvious prescription for ending nuclear arms racing is for the United States to stop its missile defense and nuclear rebuilding programs. We have heard these claims repeatedly since the 1960s.

The National Institute study we're discussing today addresses the continuing expressions of this “action-reaction” arms race narrative and its corollary “inaction-inaction” narrative. They again are the basis for frequent assertions that if the United States will only stop its nuclear programs, opponents will also stop building their nuclear forces—i.e., current U.S. efforts to maintain its deterrence capabilities, yet again, are to blame for the “arms race.” This argument has not changed since the 1960s; only the names have changed.

This action-reaction narrative is not now, nor has it ever been scholarly or empirically based. It is simply another facet of the “blame America first” mentality and revisionist Cold War histories that portrayed the United States as at fault for the Cold War—yes, Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev supposedly were benign victims reacting to U.S. hubris and expansionism.

Sound research has repeatedly revealed that this U.S.-led action-reaction/inaction-inaction narrative is generally bogus. Yet, it is a supposed “law” of international relations and has been used to criticize every U.S. strategic policy development and cycle of U.S. nuclear rebuilding since the 1960s, whether undertaken by a Republican or Democratic Administration.



Commentators have used it to oppose:

- President Johnson’s late 1960s Sentinel BMD program;
- President Nixon’s Safeguard BMD program of the early 1970s;
- the 1974 Schlesinger Doctrine;
- President Carter’s 1980 Countervailing Strategy;
- the Reagan Administration’s 1980s nuclear modernization program;
- President George W. Bush’s 2004 deployment of rudimentary strategic ballistic missile defense; and,
- The strategic nuclear programs of Presidents Obama and Trump.

Some NATO allies are now even using the same action-reaction narrative to criticize the apparent British decision to add modestly to its nuclear arsenal, arguing it will now cause an arms race. This criticism comes from Germany’s Foreign Minister, even while senior Russians themselves say there is no need to respond—perhaps because Russia has been sprinting with nuclear arms for over a decade.

The inconvenient truth is that the incessant charge of a U.S.-driven action-reaction arms race almost always is contradicted by actual historic facts. Since the 1960s, U.S. initiatives and actions, including all those I mentioned above, were *reactions to opponents’ armaments programs and aggressive foreign policies*—not the dynamic behind their arms racing.

This is why Colin Gray entitled his 1976 book on the subject: *The Soviet-American Arms Race*, not *The U.S.-Soviet Arms Race*. Colin’s word order choice for his title set the record straight regarding the dynamics of the nuclear arms competition.

In addition, U.S. inaction has not led to opponents’ inaction—as confidently predicted based on the inaction-inaction narrative. In fact, in some cases we know that U.S. inaction has spurred opponents to greater armament action and assertiveness. Most obviously, U.S. *restraint* on nuclear testing to yield has not been reciprocated by Russia, as was acknowledged officially last year.

And, in the 1960s and 1970s, domestic opponents of BMD continually assured us that US *inaction* on missile defense would lead to the cessation of further Soviet ICBM deployments—that certainly is how the 1972 ABM Treaty was sold to the U.S. Senate. However, according to General Nikolai Detinov, a key player in Soviet arms control, the ABM Treaty instead freed the Soviet Union to concentrate its resources on its next generation of MIRVed ICBMs—just the reverse of the promises based on the inaction-inaction narrative. U.S. *inaction* actually was followed by breathtaking Soviet *action*. The same pattern is true today; again only the names have changed.

This harsh reality of international relations should no longer shock anyone. But we, as a community, appear to want to deny the reality of what Albert Wohlstetter and Colin Gray



taught us decades ago, and this study demonstrates anew: that is, there are many possible forms of arms interaction; but actual history shows that the action-reaction and inaction-inaction arms race narratives are bogus as continually used by commentators to criticize U.S. policy initiatives and arms programs.

With that brief overview, I would like to introduce today's great lineup of speakers and invite their remarks on this study.

David J. Trachtenberg

David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Thank you, Keith, for providing the introduction and background context for this symposium. I think this webinar is a good complement to the one we held last month on the U.S. nuclear modernization program.

National Institute undertook this study in part because many of the contemporary arguments being raised by critics of the current U.S. nuclear modernization effort—for example, that U.S. actions will cause an arms race or destroy chances for arms control—are eerily reminiscent of the arguments raised by opponents of U.S. strategic programs over many decades. In many cases they are identical. So, we thought a review of these arguments and how they stack up in light of the historical record would not only be a useful exercise but would provide some important context for assessing the validity or invalidity of similar assertions today.

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 armaments building that date back centuries.

Our study identified various inflection points during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods when U.S. strategic offensive and defensive developments were thought by many to be the first-cause drivers of an “action-reaction” arms race. For example, in the 1980s, Senators Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Mark Hatfield (D-OR) argued that the Reagan Administration’s nuclear programs would place the world “at the starting line of a new round in the arms race.”¹ W. Averell Harriman, former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, lamented what he called “a nuclear arms race rapidly escaping out of control—and dangerously passing the point of no return.”²

Similarly, some domestic critics of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program predicted that “SDI will surely complicate efforts at arms control and stimulate an intensified arms



race.”³ Others predicted SDI “would guarantee an accelerated offensive arms race.”⁴ Of course, neither an arms race nor the demise of arms control came to pass. Indeed, the SDI program, coupled with the Reagan buildup, has been credited with helping to facilitate the ultimate demise of the USSR—not a bad outcome for the world.

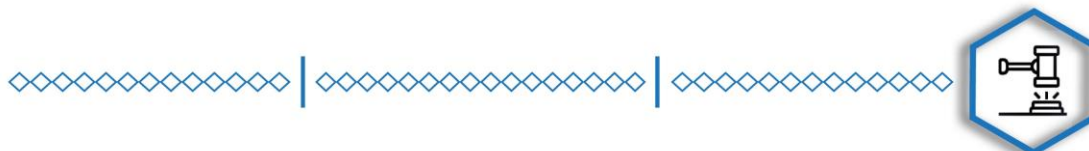
Interestingly, however, similar arguments are being heard today asserting that limits on the U.S. missile defense program are necessary to facilitate additional arms control agreements with Russia. As Jeffrey Lewis recently wrote, “If [President] Biden wants to slow this arms race, he will need to accept limits on U.S. missile defense systems... If the Biden administration is serious about reviving arms control agreements with Russia and bringing China into the fold, it will need to compromise.”⁵

Last year, one analyst accused the Trump Administration of “jumpstarting the 21st century arms race”⁶ with its nuclear modernization plans—plans which, by the way, were mostly a continuation of the program endorsed by the Obama Administration. The only deployed supplemental nuclear capability is the low-yield ballistic missile warhead, which has resulted in a decline in the overall destructive power of these weapons—hardly a condition associated with arms racing.

I would argue that some of the contemporary criticism has been hyperbolic—for example, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved its so-called “doomsday clock” ahead to only 100 seconds to midnight—the closest it has come to “apocalypse” at any time in its history, even at the height of the Cold War—reflecting concerns that “a renewed nuclear arms race...will, if unaddressed, lead to catastrophe sooner rather than later.”⁷

Similarly, as Keith mentioned, many argued that U.S. restraint in strategic programs would engender similar restraint on the other side—in other words, an “inaction-inaction” corollary.

These “action-reaction” and “inaction-inaction” arguments were voiced during the debate over the 1972 ABM Treaty; the development of Limited Nuclear Options in the 1970s; the Carter Administration’s “Countervailing Strategy”; the Reagan Administration’s nuclear build-up and SDI program in the 1980s; the Bush Administration’s withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and initial deployment of homeland missile defenses in the early 2000s; and the modernization programs initiated by the Obama Administration and carried forth by the Trump Administration.



For example, one analysis concluded that the ABM Treaty, by leaving both the United States and Soviet Union “unambiguously hostage to each other,” would “eliminate the forces driving the offensive arms race.”⁸ That of course was wishful thinking. Despite contentions at the time that the ABM Treaty’s prohibition on nationwide missile defenses would remove any incentive for the Soviets to build up their offensive forces, the greatest increase in Soviet offensive nuclear capability came after the signing of the ABM Treaty. This, despite then-Secretary of Defense McNamara’s confident prediction that the treaty “removes the need to race—there is no reward for getting ahead.”⁹ Apparently, the Soviets begged to differ.

The same arguments are also being voiced today by opponents of the current U.S. nuclear modernization program. Recent articles have warned ominously of a new spiral in the arms race between the United States and Russia—initiated by the U.S.—if the U.S. goes forward with current nuclear modernization plans. Tom Countryman, Chairman of the Arms Control Association’s Board of Directors and a former Assistant Secretary of State, has stated that “we will touch off—gradually at first, and then rapidly—an open-ended nuclear arms race.”¹⁰

What our study found is that there has been a huge gulf between the arguments of those who predicted that U.S. developments would be the catalyst for a U.S.-driven arms race and the reality of Soviet, then Russian, behavior. In fact, in every case we analyzed, the predictions of the critics turned out to be false.

For example, 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 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.

Moreover, the SDI program, coupled with a major nuclear modernization effort implemented by the Reagan Administration, occurred at the same time the Soviet Union negotiated the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty—which eliminated an entire class of ground-based nuclear missiles—and demonstrated the fallacy in the arguments of those who insisted such developments by the United States would make arms control agreements impossible.

The narrative proffered by critics of U.S. strategic offensive and defensive programs—namely, the familiar action-reaction and corollary inaction-inaction contentions—is simply not supported by history. Indeed, 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. For example, President George W. Bush’s withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and move to deploy missile defenses against rogue state missile threats



coincided with an arms control treaty sought by Russia, the Moscow Treaty, which 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. Or when the United States failed to respond to Soviet arms control violations, which only encouraged additional Soviet (and subsequently Russian) cheating, leading to a breakdown in the fabric of arms control agreements and the withdrawal by the United States from the INF and Open Skies treaties.

There are numerous other examples that demonstrate the fallacy of the action-reaction and inaction-inaction narratives as they have been applied to U.S. strategic programs and developments and used in the public debate. Indeed, it appears that the narrative that U.S. strategic developments spark dangerous reactions by others and that U.S. strategic restraint will set an example that others will follow is premised on 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 what I think could be called a form of cultural arrogance that is unsupported by the historical record.

Nevertheless, there are those who have sought to characterize the action-reaction metaphor as an immutable law of physics. For example, in the 1980s, Senators Kennedy and Hatfield argued, "In nuclear weapons lore, Newton's third law of motion has proved to be the first law of upward movement in the arms race: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."¹¹ Clearly, there have been interactions in U.S. and Soviet (and subsequently, Russian) armament programs—and our study acknowledges this. Yet, in no case has the United States been the lead cause of an action-reaction arms race.

Our study, which builds on the outstanding arms race analyses of Colin Gray and Albert Wohlstetter from the 1970s, 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 seem to 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 that contradicts available empirical evidence. Such ominous predictions remind me of the comment attributed to the legendary New York Yankees manager Yogi Berra, who said: "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future."¹²

As Colin Gray noted decades ago, "It may be revealed that in practice there has not been a Soviet-American arms race since the late 1940s."¹³ And as he and Keith Payne wrote a



decade later, “The Soviet Union historically has not taken direct action in response to U.S. deployment of a new type of military system.”¹⁴

Finally, I would call attention to a RAND study done in 1972 by Andy Marshall, which concluded:

Commonly used hypotheses about the nature of the strategic arms race, or about the U.S.-Soviet interaction process (claiming a closely coupled joint evolution of U.S. and Soviet force postures), are either demonstrably false or highly suspect.... It is alleged that the United States is racing with itself, that U.S. initiatives are the sole cause of the continuing and expanding strategic arms race. It is striking how few data are presented to support these assertions.... The current public discussion of the presumed strategic arms race is almost data- and fact-free.... To summarize, there is no spiraling arms race, either in total military budgets and force sizes or in strategic-area budgets and force sizes. There is no clear-cut, well-documented rapid action-reaction cycle.¹⁵

Interestingly, at the same time, Marshall made this recommendation: “If possible, an unclassified version of the history of the arms competition and hypotheses concerning the interaction process should be produced so as to reach Congress and the public. The field cannot be left to the arms control enthusiasts and their exaggerated views of the ‘arms race.’”¹⁶

This is precisely what our study sought to do, with the benefit of additional historical hindsight since then. Looking at various inflection points from the 1970s until the present, our study concludes—just as Andy Marshall, Colin Gray, and others concluded—that the well-worn narrative of a “U.S.-driven ‘action-reaction’ arms race” has not been borne out by history.

Our study was also informed by interviews with more than a dozen former senior U.S. government officials, on a bipartisan basis, with knowledge of and expertise in these matters. Some of them are quoted in our study. Without exception, all challenged the validity of the action-reaction arms race narrative as it has been used in the public debate. None of the participants interviewed described U.S. motivations as based on a mechanistic action-reaction arms race dynamic or a desire to match Soviet deployments either in numbers or system types.

There was also significant consensus around the proposition that the U.S. strategic restraint was not matched by similar restraint on the part of the Soviet Union. Several participants sought to emphasize the point by citing the statement of former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, who noted, “When we build, they build; when we cut, they build.”¹⁷ Indeed, the consensus of the group was that the corollary proposition that U.S. restraint in nuclear developments would encourage or be matched by similar restraint on the part of others,



including Russia, not only lacks intellectual credibility, but is being put forward despite historical evidence that proves it is wrong.

In conclusion, by citing the U.S.-driven arms race assertions and predictions of those who opposed U.S. strategic offensive and defensive programs over the last 50 years—and contrasting them to historical realities—our study provides what I think is a clear refutation of the U.S.-driven action-reaction arms race narrative as it has repeatedly been employed in the public debate.

I think the study makes a useful contribution to understanding the facts and puncturing the myths associated with this narrative. And I think it is especially useful at this point in time, when the U.S. nuclear modernization program is being challenged by those who continue to assert that U.S. action will spark a new and dangerous spiral in the arms race.

In this context, the study should also be useful for today’s policy practitioners and decision makers who need to decide where the United States should go with respect to its strategic forces. Should the Biden Administration proceed with its own nuclear posture review, it will hopefully be informed by the evidence presented in this study.

Michaela Dodge

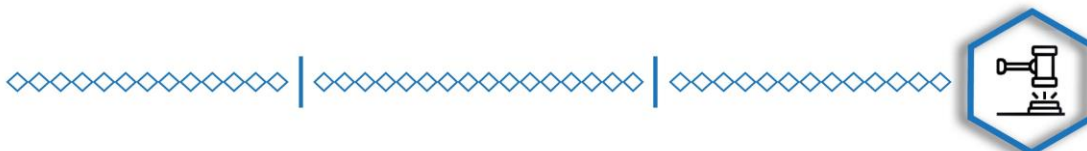
Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy. She received a Ph.D. from George Mason University in 2019.

In my remarks, I will talk about the term arms race. Then I am going to discuss three inflection points that in my mind best illustrate the argument we are making in the study.

On Arms Races

The first muddle we had to sort through when we started working on the study was deciding how to define the term arms race. This is rarely done in the public discourse. The term itself has taken on a pejorative meaning. That is because if one doesn’t define the term, he doesn’t have to do the difficult work of being conceptually clear. He can artificially increase the level of emotion in the debate.

A lack of conceptual clarity absolves its users of responsibility to consider causal mechanisms and weight of different factors that undoubtedly bear on a state’s decision to pursue weapon systems. Most importantly, arms races are not mechanistic and insulated from the overall context of international relations. They are about political hostilities and conflicts of interest, as strategist Colin Gray pointed out over four decades ago.



And it is his definition we are using in our study.¹⁸ Our inflection points covered time periods in which the United States could be considered in an arms race but also a few in which it was not. The study proves beyond doubt that U.S. actions and programmatic choices with regard to its nuclear forces are not the primary driver behind other states' nuclear programs. Of course, it would be foolish to deny an interaction between our and adversary's defense programs.

Foregoing Missile Defenses

Our first inflection point was the U.S. decision to forego missile defense programs in the early 1970s. The decision comported with the mutually assured destruction doctrine that took hold of the Pentagon nuclear and budget planning in the 1960s.

The argument went that if the United States pursued a missile defense system the Soviets would add too many long-range missiles. A U.S. missile defense system would make achieving an arms control agreement with the Soviet Union all but impossible while an ABM Treaty limitation "would break the action-reaction cycle of the arms race."¹⁹

Little did the Americans know that the Soviets would actually accelerate its strategic offensive missile deployments, even as both countries concluded the ABM Treaty and the United States forego all missile defense deployments. As David Yost summarized, "the treaty plainly enabled the Soviets to avoid an expensive competition in a domain of U.S. technological advantage. By relieving the Soviets of a resource dilemma, the ABM Treaty allowed them to invest more in other capabilities, including ICBMs."²⁰

The Carter/Reagan Build Up

Second, the combination of Soviet nuclear weapons modernization and increased international belligerence, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, led to a reassessment of U.S. nuclear policies and programs. The Reagan Administration built upon the NSDM-242 and PD-59 and conducted what became the last U.S. comprehensive nuclear modernization effort. We also had the Pershing II deployments to Europe and started serious research on missile defense systems.

The criticisms were predictable. Senators Kennedy and Hatfield called the Reagan Administration's policies "the starting line of a new round in the arms race."²¹ Ambassador Harriman complained that "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."²² Senator John Kerry said that we cannot have missile defense and arms control at the same time.²³ These criticisms sound familiar, don't they?

Yet, the Reagan Administration's policies undoubtedly contributed to the exhaustion of the Soviet regime and its demise. They also contributed to the most successful Cold War arms



control agreement: the INF Treaty. On other words, a complete opposite of what the proponents of the U.S.-led arms race narrative predicted.

The End of the Cold War and the End of History

Third, the time period after the end of the Cold War is definitionally not an arms race, although it further discredits the myth that U.S. actions are the primary motivator for other countries' strategic choices. One of my favorite quotations in the study was Jerome Wiesner's 1970 statement that U.S. unilateral actions reducing the nuclear arsenal "could even start a peace race."²⁴ Since the end of the Cold War, the United States took several unilateral measures to reduce its arsenal and decrease the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy. Yet we are not closer to a peace race than we were in the 1970s.

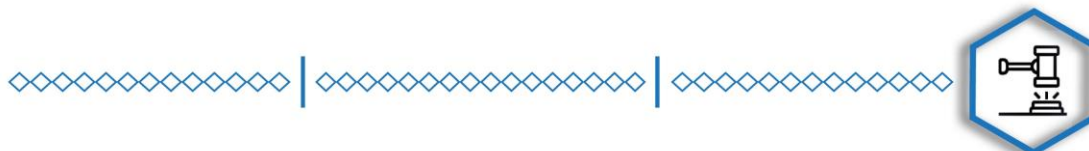
In the early 1990s, these steps included nuclear reductions, re-focus on nonproliferation and nuclear terrorism, stop to nuclear warhead testing and other modernization activities. We took bombers off alert and reduced our fleet of airborne command and control aircraft. The 1994 NPR called for a "lead but hedge" strategy and while we did quite a bit of leading, we were never that good about hedging.

We retired the MX Peacekeeper from the active inventory in 2005 and converted the B-1 bombers to a conventional-only role. U.S. strategic nuclear weapons declined by more than 60 percent—from approximately 6,000 under the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) to 1550 accountable under New START.

We've seen Russia's inventory decline and the modernization program retard in the 1990s. Soon enough, it was clear that Russia's reduction steps were more impacted by a lack of funding rather than a response to U.S. initiated reductions. We know this because once Russia started to be better off fiscally, it restarted investments in its nuclear modernization program. New nuclear armed adversaries emerged, including North Korea, Pakistan, and India. And China is on track to double the number of nuclear warheads.

Conclusion

Perhaps, it is no surprise that the U.S.-led arms race narrative changed so little in the past 40 years. If every U.S. action can be interpreted as an incentive for adversaries to pursue their programs, we avoid an unpopular discussion about whether our goals are more legitimate or better than the other guys'. We don't have to worry about reasons why our adversaries pursue their programs. As Cap Weinberger said, the term arms race "implies that our efforts to counter the military threats that we face are really as devoid of philosophical impulse and are empty of any broader significance than a sporting event." The term is "rather flip diminishment and deprecation of what I think has to be one of the noblest enterprises of man which is the defense of freedom."²⁵



Thomas G. Mahnken

Thomas G. Mahnken is President and CEO of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy Planning.

This is an important study. It deserves a prominent place as part of the growing body of literature that seeks to understand the extent to which the U.S.-Soviet competition during the Cold War actually played out in accordance with the predictions of international relations theory.²⁶ Specifically, this study is about the application of the “arms race” metaphor to the practice of strategy during the Cold War.

Metaphors are powerful²⁷ and can be particularly persuasive when they align with the preconceptions of those who use them.²⁸ The more often a metaphor is applied, the greater weight it carries and the more likely it is to be accepted. Similarly, the more it is applied the more that nuance and subtlety get drained from it.²⁹

The “arms race” metaphor has been attractive because it is simple and catchy. Moreover, there is clearly something to it: the United States and Soviet Union clearly did interact with each other during the Cold War. American arms decisions clearly influenced those of the Soviet Union, and vice versa. But labeling that interaction an arms race runs the risk of falling prey to a couple of fallacies.

First, there is the Fallacy of Perfect Interaction: the notion that the Cold War was a sort of “Gunfight at the OK Corral,” with the two gunfighters staring intently at one another from opposite ends of a dusty, deserted street, each focusing on the other’s gun, holster, and hand. Clearly the United States and the Soviet Union devoted a lot of attention to one another, but the historical record shows that in practice their attention was less focused and more prone to misperception than arms race theory would suggest.

Second, and relatedly, there is the Fallacy of Agency, also known as Strategic Narcissism: the notion that a competitor responds almost mechanically to the actions of its adversary rather than acting to achieve their own political objectives. Ultimately, such a fallacy denied the competitors agency. Again, what we know about the way the Cold War actually unfolded is at variance with this view.

The present report does an excellent job of exploring the application (and misapplication) of the arms race metaphor during the Cold War. It also suggests the way ahead for research in this area. For example, it would be useful to delve even deeper into American and Soviet arms decisions and the extent they were influenced by statements and actions of the other superpower, as opposed to being shaped by organizational culture, bureaucratic routine, the push and pull of technology, industrial considerations, or other factors. Such a project would be ambitious, but there is precedent in the studies of the U.S.-Soviet strategic interaction



performed by Andrew W. Marshall and by Ernest May, John Steinbruner, and Thomas Wolfe during the 1970s³⁰ as well as more recent attempts to assess strategic interaction among the United States, Russia, and China.³¹ Such an effort would face challenges, to be sure, to include data availability and classification, but is also likely to yield the sort of insight that can enrich our understanding of strategic interaction and help insulate us against the mindless recitation of metaphors.

¹ Edward M. Kennedy and Mark O. Hatfield, *Freeze! How You Can Help Prevent Nuclear War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 102.

² 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>.

³ Jerome Slater and David Goldfisher, "Can SDI Provide a Defense?," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 5, (1986), p. 842.

⁴ 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. 48.

⁵ Jeffrey Lewis, "The Nuclear Option: Slowing a New Arms Race Means Compromising on Missile Defenses," *Foreign Affairs*, February 22, 2021, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-02-22/nuclear-option>.

⁶ 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>.

⁷ John Mecklin, ed., Science and Security Board, "2020 Doomsday Clock Statement," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, available at <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time>.

⁸ Slater and Goldfisher, op. cit., p. 853.

⁹ Richard L. Garwin and Hans A. Bethe, "Anti-Ballistic-Missile Systems," *Scientific American*, Vol. 218, No. 3, (March, 1968), pp. 23-24, available at <https://fas.org/rlg/03%2000%201968%20Bethe-Garwin%20ABM%20Systems.pdf>.

¹⁰ Thomas Countryman, "Why Nuclear Arms Control Matters Today," *The Foreign Service Journal*, May 2020, available at <https://www.afsa.org/why-nuclear-arms-control-matters-today>.

¹¹ Kennedy and Hatfield, op. cit., p. 103.

¹² Quoted at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/261863-it-s-tough-to-make-predictions-especially-about-the-future>.

¹³ Colin S. Gray, "How Does the Nuclear Arms Race Work?," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1974), p. 286, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45083180>.

¹⁴ Keith B. Payne and Colin S. Gray, "Nuclear Policy and the Defensive Transition," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Spring, 1984), p. 835, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20041909>.

¹⁵ Andrew W. Marshall, *Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis (U)*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, April 1972), R-862-PR, p. 22, available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R862.html>.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

¹⁷ Harold Brown testimony before a joint House and Senate Budget Committee meeting, 1979, quoted at <https://www.bartleby.com/73/400.html>.



¹⁸ For the purposes of this study, an arms race is defined as a relationship between “two or more parties perceiving themselves to be in an adversary relationship, who are increasing or improving their armaments at a rapid [emphasis in the original] rate and structuring their respective military postures with a general [emphasis in the original] attention to the past, current, and anticipated military and political behavior of the other parties.” See Colin S. Gray, “The Arms Race Phenomenon,” *World Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1971), p.74, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009706>.

¹⁹ Testimony of Marvin L. Goldberger, Senate Committee on Appropriations, *Department of Defense Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1972* (92nd Congress, First Session), May 25, 1971, p. 865, available at https://books.googleusercontent.com/books/content?req=AKW5QadPtoCEk_Ju_F8jkbDLCq1Rar2kRQ58yA4dMty9Nb16hQYLVOpWHLRgaIz7eWc6Ff6z_JNxVMJrzmymt3eHC4xetM9PCZEt15GZnv9mclpVsVvLj81R3YV55z7X1Jw5mpZp6VIQaINpjPjxdKgrmkz4VimYlrebsed6Ueecp8LFuNm1j8ImvYhLEdVGVS8M_7MX-jP7SL2iOndegBXpcz0T_1KuQdV3osONHo9r9w2vS1gBPWyzUKkrLIn9bSTp2LBm0sXwXffidDIlmsOCdTS92UbA.

²⁰ David S. Yost, “Strategic Stability in the Cold War: Lessons for Continuing Challenges,” *Proliferation Papers*, No. 36, Winter 2011, p. 22, available at <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp36yost.pdf>.

²¹ Kennedy and Hatfield, op. cit., p. 102.

²² Harriman, op. cit.

²³ W. Bruce Weinrod, “Strategic Defense: Implications for Arms Negotiations,” *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, 16 October 1985, available at http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf_media/1985/pdf/bg463.pdf.

²⁴ *ABM, MIRV, SALT, and the Nuclear Arms Race: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization*, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate (91st Congress, 2nd Session (1970), p. 376, available at [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b643705&view=1up&seq=7](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b643705&view=1up&seq=7).

²⁵ Address by Caspar Weinberger to the International Democrat Union, “Peace Through Strength,” July 25, 1985, printed in U.S. Department of State, *American Foreign Policy Current Documents 1985*, p. 61, available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=xgbJEaY1SaAC&pg=PR12&lpg=PR12&dq=weinberger+current+documents+july+25,+1985&source=bl&ots=g74UUYRSL&sig=ACfU3U1WfzdH9JH0XfKIDKUPOm4hMluA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiZnvHNgL7pAhX0IHIEHfZwAC0Q6AEwAXoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=weinberger%20current%20documents%20july%2025%2C%201985&f=false>.

²⁶ See, for example, Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Thomas G. Mahnken, Joseph A. Maiolo and David Stevenson, editors, *Arms Races in International Politics from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Thomas G. Mahnken, “Arms Races and Long-Term Competition” in Thomas G. Mahnken and Dan Blumenthal, editors, *Strategy in Asia: The Past, Present, and Future of Regional Security* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 225-240.

²⁷ And also potentially misleading. See David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), chapter 9.

²⁸ Ernest R. May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

²⁹ Thomas G. Mahnken, “Containment: Myth and Metaphor” in Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015).

³⁰ Marshall, op. cit.; Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, and Thomas W. Wolfe, *History of the Strategic Arms Competition, 1945–1972*, two volumes (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 1981).

³¹ Thomas G. Mahnken, Gillian Evans, Toshi Yoshihara, Eric S. Edelman, and Jack Bianchi, *Understanding Strategic Interaction in the Second Nuclear Age* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).

