ANALYSIS

"KNOWING YOUR ENEMY"
JAMES R. SCHLESINGER AND THE RISE OF TAILORED DETERRENCE

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In the years ahead, the United States will confront an unprecedented geopolitical challenge that threatens its far-flung alliances and, more directly, the security of the American homeland. For the first time in the nuclear age, the United States will face two peer nuclear adversaries, China and Russia. The bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission recently addressed this unparalleled situation, concluding that the United States "must urgently prepare for the new reality, and measures need to be taken now to deal with these new threats."[1]

But *how* should the United States prepare for a two-peer threat environment? The strategic sensibility of James R. Schlesinger, a pioneering Cold War strategist who confronted the rise of a peer nuclear adversary, can help address this question. Given the confounding nature of the emerging strategic landscape, it may seem puzzling to turn to the past. Schlesinger, after all, thought and wrote about deterring just one great-power adversary. And though he faced the rise of a peer nuclear rival in the Soviet Union, the Soviets—contra China today—were isolated from the global economy and suffered from a relatively weak defense-industrial base.

Notwithstanding these acknowledged differences, Schlesinger recognized a fundamental feature of peacetime competition that transcends time, space, and number of peer rivals: Adversaries hold distinctive values and behavioral tendencies that defy "rational" mirror-imaging. Moreover, a wise competitor, as Schlesinger understood, will exploit his opponent's self-damaging proclivities to secure competitive advantages. U.S. nuclear strategy, as such, should be tailored to adversary thinking—*not* that of American planners. The totality of Mutual Assured Destruction—the idea that the nuclear balance is inescapably stalemated—has not nurtured a community of like-minded nuclear powers. Nor has it erased the need to compete for comparative advantage.

This paper proceeds in three parts, stretching Schlesinger's career as a University of Virginia economics professor (1956-1963), RAND Corporation analyst (1963-1969), and secretary of defense (1973-1975). First, it examines Schlesinger's early work as an economics professor and strategic analyst, underscoring the behavioral asymmetries existing between peer competitors. Second, it treats his approach to peacetime nuclear

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[1] Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Alexandria, VA: Institute of Defense Analyses, October 2023), p. v, available at https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/a/am/americas-strategic-posture.

competition, stressing the need to tailor planning to adversary strategic thought. Finally, it explores Secretary of Defense Schlesinger's and his successors' exploitation of Soviet thinking, emphasizing that targeting doctrine and force development are a function of adversary perceptions. The conclusion offers lessons for today, underscoring that "knowing your enemy" is a demanding challenge that deserves sustained attention, even in the shadow of the Balance of Terror.

Diagnosing the Enemy

"Strategy," Schlesinger wrote in 1968, "depends on the image of the foe."[2] He lamented, then, that projections of the Soviets in the 1950s and 1960s had swung wildly from "commie rats who only understand force," to enthusiastic partners-in-detente "who are just as urbane, civilized, and intent on the eradication of differences as are those on our side."[3] While the former engendered illusory fears of Soviet nuclear dominance in the 1950s, the latter nurtured misguided expectations that the Kremlin would forego a costly strategic arms buildup in the 1960s. Both projections, Schlesinger contended, arose from a flawed image of a "rational" adversary that shared American values and behavioral predispositions.[4]

In a series of RAND papers, Schlesinger criticized U.S. analysts for ignoring two "non-rational" factors of strategic analysis: historical legacies and organizational behavior. Regarding the former, he argued that profound national experiences helped explain why U.S. nuclear superiority lasted through the mid-1960s. An "underlying Pearl Harbor complex" had compelled the United States, a maritime power experienced in global power projection, to rapidly build up heavy bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) to close presumed, though imaginary, deterrence gaps.[5] Assuming the Soviets shared the same strategic values, it was only natural for U.S. analysts to project that the Kremlin—whose command economy allowed for vast military expenditures—was far ahead in long-range missile and bomber production. Notwithstanding American expectations, however, Soviet defense planners, imbued with a continental mindset, had actually programmed "skimpy" intercontinental forces in favor of shorter-range capabilities.[6] While U.S. intelligence

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[2] James R. Schlesinger, "The 'Soft' Factors in Systems Studies," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 24, No. 9 (November 1968), p. 17.

[3] James R. Schlesinger, *On Relating Non-Technical Elements to Systems Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, February 1967), RAND Paper P-3545, p. 18, available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P3545.html.

[4] See, for example, James R. Schlesinger, "The Changing Environment for Systems Analysis," in James R. Schlesinger, *Selected Papers on National Security, 1964-1968* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1965), pp. 35-54, available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P5284.html; *Arms Interactions and Arms Control* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, September 1968), P-3881, available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P3881.html; and, Schlesinger, *On Relating Non-Technical Elements to Systems Studies*, op. cit.

[5] James R. Schlesinger, *European Security and the Nuclear Threat Since 1945* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, April 1967), RAND Paper, P-3574, p. 17, available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P3574.pdf.

[6] Ibid., p. 18.

estimators later complained about the "difficulty understanding the Soviet rationale,"[7] Schlesinger surmised that the devastating German invasion in 1941 had focused the Soviets on "an attack from Western Europe – this time abetted by the United States."[8]

Schlesinger maintained that historical legacies also conditioned Soviet organizational behavior, the second non-rational factor of analysis. On this point, RAND colleagues Joseph E. Loftus and Andrew W. Marshall, who had examined long-term trends in Soviet military spending,[9] shaped his thinking. Loftus and Marshall diagnosed that the Soviets, scarred by the Nazi German invasion, were predisposed to invest heavily in territorial air defenses and theater-range nuclear forces.[10] Unlike the Americans, the Soviets had a separate air defense service that enjoyed a preeminent position within the defense establishment.[11] Moreover, the Soviet Ground Forces, which did not share the U.S. Air Force's interest in intercontinental strike, initially controlled the strategic missile arsenal.[12] Even after the Strategic Rocket Forces came online in 1959, Soviet planners prioritized continental missions. Schlesinger and his colleagues thus concluded that the Kremlin "was pursuing the competition with the United States in quite different ways."[13]

Schlesinger characterized Loftus and Marshall's work, along with the literature on organizational behavior, evolutionary anthropology, and psychopolitical analysis, as "a revelation on the road to Damascus."[14] In the mid-1960s, he joined Marshall on trips to Harvard Business School to exchange ideas with management experts.[15] Schlesinger and Marshall also discussed anthropologist Robert Ardrey's book, *The Territorial Imperative*,[16] which emphasized the deep-seated primal instincts that drove humans to commit self-damaging behavior, as well as the psychopolitical analysis of Nathan Leites, a RAND

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[7] Central Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Attack* (Washington, D.C.: CIA, October 18, 1963), National Intelligence Estimate 11-8-63, p. 3, available at https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000267776.pdf.

[8] Schlesinger, *European Security and the Nuclear Threat Since 1945*, p. 18.

[9] Joseph E. Loftus and Andrew W. Marshall, *RAND Research on the Soviet Military* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, February 21, 1958), RAND Draft Memorandum, D-4943.

[10] For a summary of Loftus and Marshall's classified work, see Graham T. Allison and A. W. Marshall, *Explanation and Prediction of Governmental Action: An Organizational Process Model* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, May 1968), RAND Research Memorandum, RM-5897-PR, pp. 19-21.

[11] Steven J. Zaloga, *The Kremlin's Nuclear Sword: The Rise and Fall of Russia's Strategic Nuclear Forces, 1945-2000* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2002), pp. 125-125; and Dima Adamsky, "The Art of Net Assessment and Uncovering Foreign Military Innovations: Learning from Andrew W. Marshall's Legacy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (2020), pp. 611-644.

[12] Zaloga, *The Kremlin's Nuclear Sword*, pp. 58-59.

[13] Andrew W. Marshall, "The Origins of Net Assessment," chapter in, Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Net Assessment and Military Strategy: Retrospective and Prospective Essays* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2020), p. 4.

[14] Schlesinger quoted in Mie Augier and Andrew W. Marshall, "The Fog of Strategy: Some Organizational Perspectives on Strategy and the Strategic Management Challenges in the Changing Competitive Environment," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2017), p. 279.

[15] For Schlesinger and Marshall's trips to Harvard Business School, see Jacqueline Deal, "Mr. Marshall as a People Person," in Andrew May, ed., *Remembering Andy Marshall: Essays by His Friends* (USA: Andrew Marshall Foundation, 2020), p. 147.

[16] Andrew W. Marshall, *Reflections on Net Assessment* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2022), pp. 10, 25, 132. See also Marshall, interviewed by Alfred Goldberg and Maurice Matloff, 15 June 1992, pp. 74-75, 132.

colleague working on the cultural roots of national perceptions.[17] This eclectic body of work crystalized for Schlesinger that the Soviet defense establishment "should be viewed organizationally—as sluggish organisms, dominated by doctrines based specifically on obsolescent strategic views…"[18] Moreover, such a broad perspective illuminated why, exactly, the Soviets "were doing remarkably little to build up their intercontinental strike forces,"[19] and why the Soviets poured staggering resources into territorial air defenses – notwithstanding the diminished threat of heavy bombers relative to ICBMs.[20] Soviet historical legacies, Schlesinger believed, were thus "reinforced by bureaucratic tendencies reflecting routinized functions and outlooks."[21]

Schlesinger concluded that "soft" non-rational factors blended with "hard" realities – namely, economic and technological constraints—to generate a distinctive Soviet posture. The Kremlin, for instance, initially relied on theater-range nuclear forces due to "the greater ease of such a deployment for a nation with limited resources and with limited experience in advance R&D."[22] Schlesinger lamented that in the standard American assessment, Soviet resources "are assumed, like manna, to be supplied by a Kindly Providence."[23] Mainstream analysts, he believed, erred in projecting a Soviet command economy that would transcend opportunity costs and compete more efficiently.[24]

Schlesinger, however, had a more optimistic long-term outlook. Dating back to his tenure as a University of Virginia economics professor, he had criticized the image of a Soviet economic miracle. The Kremlin, laboring under severe resource constraints, could not escape the burden of choice by spending its way out of every dilemma. Indeed, his 1960 book *The Political Economy of National Security* indicted the intelligence community for "drastically underestimating" the "immense" Soviet defense burden.[25] An extended peacetime competition would be a significant drag on the Soviet economy. When Schlesinger departed Charlottesville for Santa Monica in 1963, he suspected Soviet military spending "might be so high as to be unsustainable in the long run."[26]

In retrospect, Schlesinger's diagnosis of the Soviets has aged well. Soft factors like historical trauma and organizational behavior did, in fact, generate peculiar predispositions.

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[17] James R. Schlesinger, "Nathan Leites: An Old World Figure in a New World Setting," in *Remembering Nathan Leites, An Appreciation: Recollections of Some Friends, Colleagues, and Students* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1989), pp. 55-62.

[18] Schlesinger, *Arms Interactions and Arms Control*, op. cit., p. 5.

[19] Ibid., p. 3.

[20] Schlesinger, *On Relating Non-Technical Elements to Systems Studies*, op. cit., p. 28.

[21] Schlesinger, *European Security and the Nuclear Threat Since 1945*, op. cit., p. 18.

[22] Ibid., p. 19.

[23] Schlesinger, Arms Interactions and Arms Control, op. cit., p. 4.

[24] As late as the mid-1980s, esteemed Western economists believed a peacetime military competition favored the Soviet economy. See, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith, "Reflections," *The New Yorker*, September 3, 1984, pp. 54-65, esp. 61.

[25] James R. Schlesinger, *The Political Economy of National: The Political Economy of National Security: A Study of the Economic Aspects of the Contemporary Power Struggle* (New York: Praeger, 1960), p. 36.

[26] Quoted in Gordon S. Barrass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 252.

Nazi German air raids on Moscow left a searing "psychological imprint" on Soviet leaders, who, from 1945 to the early 1960s, plowed more resources into obsolescing air defenses than strategic offensive forces.[27] Even as the United States drew down continental air defenses in the 1960s, the Soviets dedicated 15 percent of military expenditure to this mission. Prioritizing regime survival and political control above all else, the Kremlin even committed a shocking 1-2 percent of GDP to the construction of a vast network of underground command centers.[28] Perplexed U.S. defense planners, like Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, disparaged these efforts as "the greatest single military error in the world."[29] Soviet history and organizational culture, however, said otherwise.

Moreover, "hard" technical constraints limited Soviet intercontinental forces until technological breakthroughs enabled the massive buildup of the late 1960s. The first-generation Soviet ICBM "proved so poorly suited to the rapidly changing strategic environment that the program had to be curtailed."[30] The Soviets, thus impaired, were forced to divert scarce resources to theater-range ballistic missiles. Even if more "rational" calculations had driven planning, Moscow still lacked the defense-industrial base to match its rival. The Kremlin depended on nuclear brinkmanship until it was ready to vie for strategic superiority.

Amidst the uncertainty that characterized the Soviet buildup in the late 1960s, Schlesinger's diagnosis of Soviet tendencies equipped him to assess the evolving situation. His empirical approach allowed him to move beyond McNamara's abstract image of a like-minded opponent and accurately diagnose the nature of the competition.

Diagnosing the Competition

In the wake of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, McNamara presumed the Soviets drew the same lesson as he did: Pursuing nuclear superiority was both strategically worthless and a senseless allocation of national resources. After all, in the emerging era of Mutual Assured Destruction, the inferior Soviet arsenal could survive a large-scale attack and still inflict catastrophic damage on the United States. McNamara thus concluded, "Our numerical superiority, great as it was, on the order of 20-to-1, could not be translated into usable military power."[31] Competing for nuclear superiority, then, was delusional *and* cost-ineffective.

Believing his logic universal, McNamara insisted, in a 1965 interview, that "the Soviets have decided that they have lost the quantitative [arms] race, and they are not seeking to

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[27] Adamsky, "The Art of Net Assessment and Uncovering Foreign Military Innovations: Learning from Andrew W. Marshall's Legacy," op. cit., pp. 611-644.

[28] Zaloga, *The Kremlin's Nuclear Sword*, op. cit., pp. 126, 166-167; and Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, op. cit., p. 210.

[29] McNamara quoted in Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965-1969* (Washington, D.C.: OSD Historical Office, 2011), p. 351.

[30] Zaloga, *The Kremlin's Nuclear Sword*, op. cit., p. 60.

[31] Robert McNamara, as quoted in, "Interview with Robert McNamara, 1986 [1]," *GBH Archives*, February 20, 1986, available at https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_DF35A31CD90545FE83A077DE010DD044.

engage us in that contest."[32] The Kremlin would, instead, scale back its militarized economy, forgo a costly strategic arms buildup, and pursue a more "rational" consumer society.[33] Conflating American values with those of the Soviets, McNamara predicted that economic diversification "will tend to limit the size and help determine the character of the Soviet military program."[34] To entice the Soviets down the consumer-driven path, he capped strategic force levels, which started leveling off in 1965. The Kremlin would, presumably, reciprocate.

The Soviets nonetheless spurned McNamara's goodwill. In the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, the Kremlin had finally recognized the import of intercontinental weaponry and, from that point on, considered itself locked in a "struggle for strategic superiority."[35] Stability, for Moscow, was a function of *Soviet* nuclear primacy—not Mutual Assured Destruction. Alas, even as U.S. strategic forces plateaued, Soviet missile construction hurtled toward its rival's self-imposed ceiling of 1,054 ICBMs and 656 SLBMs. McNamara, however, continued to be blinded by his modernist assumptions, which he simply recast to fit changing circumstances. Rather than a sprint toward superiority, he believed the Soviet nuclear breakout confirmed his universal logic. Moscow was merely reacting, albeit irrationally, to the since-completed U.S. missile buildup, maintaining its ability to hold American cities and industry at risk of "Assured Destruction." As the defense secretary warned in a 1967 address, "*actions* … relating to the build-up of nuclear forces necessarily trigger *reactions* by the other side."[36]

Accordingly, McNamara moved to extinguish this *action-reaction phenomenon.* Opting for restraint once more, he dramatically drew down strategic air defenses and, on the offensive end, slashed development of a heavier missile and terrain-hugging bomber—programs that would have enhanced counterforce targeting in the 1970s. Strategic forces capable of the Assured-Destruction mission—which required relatively unsophisticated capabilities to kill "soft" urban-industrial assets—were deemed sufficient for deterrence. This decision effectively curtailed the range of attack options, as the lightweight Minuteman ICBM and B-52 bomber—despite several rounds of modernization—could not reliably conduct discriminate strikes on hardened targets. Such handicaps were precisely the point, however: As one of McNamara's deputies later argued, the Soviets "were more apt to emulate than capitulate."[37]

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[32] McNamara interview, *U.S. News & World Report*, April 12, 1965, p. 52.

[33] For McNamara's "rational," modernist assumptions, see James Cameron, *The Double Game: The Demise of America's Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 62-66.

[34] Robert McNamara, as quoted in, U.S. Senate, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1964 (Washington, D.C.:* USGPO, 1964), p. 37.

[35] General-Colonel Danilevich interview, 21 September 1992, in John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Shull, eds., *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985, Vol. 2: Soviet Post-Cold War Testimonial Evidence* (McLean, VA: BDM Federal, Inc., September 22, 1995) p. 33.

[36] Robert S. McNamara, "The Dynamics of Nuclear Strategy," in *Department of State Bulletin,* LVII, No. 1476, October 9, 1967, p. 443. Emphasis added.

[37] Paul C. Warnke, "Apes on a Treadmill," *Foreign Policy*, No. 18 (Spring 1975), p. 28.

The Soviets, however, notwithstanding McNamara's sanguine diagnosis, proved far more eager to compete than emulate. American restraint could not alleviate the Kremlin's anxiety about regime survival, and it continued to invest heavily in air defense. And offensively, in 1969, the Soviets blew past the U.S. land-based missile posture. By 1975, the Soviets had amassed 1,572 ICBMs and 815 SLBMs—a quantitative advantage in overall numbers *and* heavy missiles that the 1972 Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) codified. Contra McNamara's action-reaction diagnosis, this offensive buildup was fueled, according to a senior Russian official, by "a kind of internal arms race inside the [Soviet] defense industry"—*not* U.S. force development.[38]

In the late 1960s, at the RAND Corporation, Schlesinger and his close friend and colleague, Andrew Marshall, pioneered an analytic alternative to the action-reaction stalemate. They believed that the image of spiraling arms race had rationalized a blind pursuit of stability. Instead of a stalemated nuclear rivalry, in which the *sole* object was nurturing restraint with a like-minded opponent, the RAND analysts envisioned a long-term competition.

Drawing from their earlier work, Schlesinger and Marshall assessed that the Soviets would struggle to compete with the United States over the long run. That the Kremlin would—or even could—offset every American initiative defied reality, given its weak technological base and self-damaging tendencies. The Soviets, instead, would be slow to abandon standardized outlooks and behavior, as evidenced by their delayed intercontinental missile buildup and heavy investment in air defense. As Schlesinger wrote in response to McNamara's 1967 address, the action-reaction model "presupposes a degree of responsiveness to the deployment decisions of a rival that is historically questionable."[39] McNamara, who imagined "a game of subtle move and countermove based on high sensitivity to the logical implications of the opponent's actions," had obscured "the slowness of arms responses, the lost opportunities, and the perseverance of [Soviet] vulnerabilities."[40] As such, Schlesinger lamented that the defense secretary "allowed logic to drive policy to an extent … not entirely suited to this world."[41]

Schlesinger and Marshall's long-term competition framework emphasized the psychological and behavioral asymmetries between the superpowers. By stimulating certain Soviet tendencies, like a propensity to drain resources on air defense, the United States could spur its opponent to double down on self-damaging behavior. As Marshall later recalled, "Schlesinger arrived at RAND with the idea that the object was outlasting the Soviets and encouraging them to devote resources to activities that were less threatening or even favorable to the United States."[42] To do so, Schlesinger encouraged planners to recognize that "the response of an opponent to actions on our part is more likely to be related to

[38] Vitalii Leonidovich Kataev interview, May 1993, in Hines, ed., *Soviet Intentions, Vol. 2*, op. cit., p. 97.

[39] Schlesinger, *Arms Interaction and Arms Control*, op. cit., p. 14.

[40] Ibid., p. 2.

[41] James R. Schlesinger, "The Office of the Secretary of Defense," in Robert J. Art, Vincent Davis, Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Reorganizing America's Defense: Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985), p. 262.

[42] Marshall, "The Origins of Net Assessment," op. cit., p. 7.

internal group norms and values than to the logic of the situation."[43] He fully embraced, then, the challenge of "knowing your enemy,"[44] and urged "far greater effort than heretofore into what are the true attention cues for particular [Soviet] organizations…"[45] However, at this early stage, Schlesinger and Marshall had already identified U.S. counterforce capabilities as one such attention cue. Hard-target-kill capabilities would intensify the Kremlin's fixation with regime survival and political control, spurring another round of defensive expenditures.

Both analysts, therefore, condemned McNamara's repudiation of advanced counterforce weaponry—an area where the United States enjoyed a significant lead in on-board digital guidance systems. In a paper codifying their long-term competition framework, Marshall emphasized, "A general theme of strategy development should be the seeking of areas of U.S. comparative advantage, and the steering of the strategic arms competition into these areas, where possible."[46] The terrain-hugging bomber and heavier ICBM, as such, represented a missed opportunity to capitalize on targeting advantages and develop war-fighting concepts the Soviets could not emulate. In the late 1960s, Schlesinger developed such operational concepts, believing the strategic posture—at that time, designed to execute massive and indiscriminate strikes—required flexible attack options to offset the Soviet buildup. "Providing this instrument," he wrote in a 1967 draft memorandum, "requires forces which can strike a wide variety of targets either incrementally or simultaneously and with weapons and accuracies which minimize collateral damage…" He continued: "It is critical that *the values of the country being deterred* be utilized in the calculations of the levels of destruction required for deterrence."[47]

Schlesinger, therefore, regretted the decision to foreswear weapons capable of holding at risk valued Soviet assets. Hedging with a large-payload ICBM, he advised in a 1965 paper, would have positioned the United States to render obsolete generational Soviet investments in hardened missile silos (which eventually came online in the 1970s).[48] Similarly, hedging with terrain-hugging bombers and advanced cruise missiles would have nullified low-altitude Soviet air defenses (which emerged, at great expense, in the late 1960s and early 1970s).[49] Rather than drive up the costs for the Soviets to maintain these cherished investments, however, U.S. defense planners had eased pressure on what Schlesinger believed to be an unsustainable defense burden.

Dismayed by the direction of the strategic posture under McNamara, Schlesinger could not have known that in the years ahead, he would have the opportunity to steer nuclear

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[43] J. R. Schlesinger, *Some Notes on Issues of Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, September 21, 1962), RAND Draft Memorandum, D-10508, p. 4.

[44] Schlesinger, *On Relating Non-Technical Elements to Systems Studies*, op. cit., p. 16.

[45] Schlesinger, *Arms Interactions and Arms Control*, op. cit., p. 6.

[46] A. W. Marshall, *Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1972), RAND Report, R-862-PR, p. 35, available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R862.html.

[47] Schlesinger, untitled draft memorandum on nuclear options, James R. Schlesinger Papers, Library of Congress, Box 40, Folder 5 Strategic Forces, 1967-68.

[48] Schlesinger, *The Changing Environment for Systems Analysis*, op. cit., p. 49.

[49] Ibid., p. 40.

policy in a more competitive direction. In the 1970s, as a key policy maker in the Nixon and Ford Administrations, he would translate his diagnosis of the competition into a prescription to win the strategic arms rivalry.

Prescribing Victory

After joining the Richard M. Nixon Administration in February 1969, Schlesinger enjoyed a meteoric rise from assistant director of the Bureau of the Budget (1969-71), chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (1971-73), director of the Central Intelligence Agency (1973), to secretary of defense (1973-75). At each stop, the analyst-turned-policymaker was a staunch advocate of limited counterforce targeting. As defense secretary, though, he launched a full-fledged revival of American nuclear strategy, the impact of which endures today.

Declaring himself a "revivalist" of a military establishment racked by the Vietnam War and loss of nuclear superiority,[50] Secretary of Defense Schlesinger categorically rejected the somber national mood that defined the 1970s. As *Time* magazine cast doubt on capitalism's future,[51] and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger desperately chased a SALT II agreement, Schlesinger instead asked, "Why the hell should we lose?"[52] Indeed, his optimism so unnerved Kissinger's staff that they believed he wanted to "beat the Soviets in an arms race"[53]—a not entirely unfounded concern. Though he harbored no desire to outbuild the Soviets, the defense secretary certainly intended to lock in asymmetric advantages below the threshold of all-out nuclear warfare. The Soviets, as he reminded Congress shortly upon taking office, were not "ten feet tall."[54]

As such, Schlesinger's strategic overhaul advanced along two interrelated tracks: targeting doctrine and weapons procurement policy. Together, these initiatives would push America's lead in digital technology and develop strike systems to execute limited nuclear options—which would exacerbate the Kremlin's fear for regime survival and its territorial integrity. Moreover, if the Soviets attempted to match these sophisticated attack options, given their comparatively weak technological base and restrictive defense burden, they would have to compete on American terms. As Schlesinger revealed in a then-classified 1973 lecture, "We certainly desire to develop a strategic edge in terms of hypothetical war-fighting capabilities against a slowly reacting Soviet Union."[55]

Regarding the first track, targeting doctrine, Schlesinger assumed office at an auspicious moment, just as bureaucratic momentum was building for his strategic philosophy. On July

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[50] James R. Schlesinger, "Watching Birds and Budgets," *Time*, Vol. 103, No. 6 (February 11, 1974), p. 16.

[51] "Can Capitalism Survive?" *Time*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (July 14, 1975).

[52] Mckitrick and Angevine, eds., *Reflections on Net Assessment*, op. cit., p. 78.

[53] Jan M. Lodal to Secretary Kissinger, "Secretary Schlesinger's Presentation at the NSC Meeting," September 13, 1974, Digital National Security Archive (hereafter DNSA), *U.S. Nuclear History, Pt. II*.

[54] Schlesinger testimony, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Forces in Europe* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1973), p. 80.

[55] Schlesinger lecture, National War College, August 21, 1973, available at https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01554R003500170001-9.pdf.

13, 1973, only weeks into his tenure, he endorsed an interagency report on U.S. nuclear policy, overseen by John S. Foster, Jr., director of Defense Research and Engineering, which recommended broader attack options.[56] The report fleshed out the findings of an ad hoc Defense Department panel led by Foster that had convened the previous year, which Schlesinger's work at RAND had directly influenced.[57] The "Foster Panel" echoed Schlesinger when it proposed "attack options which, when withheld, can credibly threaten targets *highly valued by the enemy leadership* for the purpose of deterring escalation across those boundaries."[58] When Schlesinger forwarded his approval of the interagency report to the White House, he enclosed draft guidance to adjust the existing targeting policy. An objective of limited nuclear employment, it read, should be "holding some *vital enemy targets hostage* and threatening their subsequent destruction" to negotiate a war termination on favorable grounds.[59]

When President Nixon authorized a refined version of Schlesinger's proposal in January 1974, tailored attack options were incorporated into official policy.[60] After issuing guidance for the employment of nuclear weapons in April, the defense secretary directed planners "to codify the target system—to hit things which destroyed the regime; to get military forces, including conventional forces which could attack after a nuclear exchange." He insisted they "look at the political details. For example, Russians are less than 50% of the population of the USSR. Should we say we will hit Russians and let the 'Golden Horde' take over?"[61] Moreover, Schlesinger insisted that selectively disclosing these plans—as he did in classified hearings sanitized for public release—would "enhance deterrence by creating grave uncertainty on the part of current conservative Soviet leadership."[62] The idea was to unambiguously hold at risk what the Soviet *leadership* valued most: its political, economic, and military grip on society.

For a better sense of the "political details," Schlesinger appointed Andrew Marshall as director of the newly inaugurated Office of Net Assessment in October 1973. Marshall's primary task was to assess functional military balances. But Schlesinger also tasked his friend to initiate a research program on Soviet perceptions and the political-psychological impact of military forces. "The idea," Marshall later recalled, "was to try to look at… 'What is

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[56] Cover letter from Schlesinger to Kissinger, "Response to NSSM 169," July 13, 1973, enclosure to NSSM 169 *Summary Report*, DNSA, *U.S. Nuclear History, Pt. II.*

[57] Terry Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 99-100.

[58] The Foster Panel's report remains classified, though there are numerous supporting memorandums and documents that summarize its findings. See, for example, Memorandum from OASD(SA) to OSD, "US Policy for Employment of Nuclear Weapons," July 7, 1972, DNSA, *U.S. Nuclear History, 1969-1976: Weapons, Arms Control, and War Plans in an Age of Strategic Parity* (hereafter *Nuclear History, Pt. II*). Emphasis added.

[59] Draft National Security Decision Memorandum, July 13, 1973, attachment to cover letter from Schlesinger to Kissinger, DNSA, *U.S. Nuclear History, Pt. II*.

[60] National Security Decision Memorandum 242, "Policy for Planning the Employment of Nuclear Weapons," January 17, 1974, DNSA, *U.S. Nuclear History, Pt. II*.

[61] Memorandum of Conversation, August 2, 1973, DNSA, *The Kissinger Conversations, Supplement: A verbatim Record of U.S. Diplomacy, 1969-1977*.

[62] Limited Nuclear Option (LNO) Discussion, December 2, 1974, DNSA, *Nuclear History, Pt. II*.

it that [the Soviets] pay attention to about us? What sorts of things seem to give us high scores in their books? What things don't matter or give us low scores?' In other words, how can we then start to do those things or show those characteristics which impress them and influence their assessments?" Studying Soviet perceptions "was one of [Schlesinger's] absolutely fundamental views about things."[63]

Marshall, who participated in subsequent targeting revisions, located Schlesinger's view as "something that runs through a lot of [military posturing] in the '70s."[64] Indeed, the Jimmy Carter Administration subsequently adopted Schlesinger's tailored approach, concluding: "Since the Soviets appear to have a concept of military victory, even in nuclear war, we should seek employment policies that would make a Soviet victory as seen through Soviet eyes, as improbable as we can make it in any contingency."[65] Soviet eyes, then, demanded U.S. capabilities to "attack, in a selective and measured way, a range of military, industrial, and political targets"[66] and to "maintain roughly equal counterforce capabilities."[67] Marshall's ongoing research program had revealed that "the top Soviet leadership … were very much focused on counterforce and therefore they looked at us with that perspective." As such, Soviet values "required us to get into the counterforce business for deterrent purposes."[68] This targeting emphasis carried into the Reagan Administration, which fully embraced selective and discriminate nuclear options.

Though nuclear forces lacked flexibility in the mid-1970s, Schlesinger's weapons procurement policy, the second track of his strategic revival, aimed to make discriminate options a reality in the 1980s. While his predecessors either refrained from or failed to make the requisite upgrades,[69] he successfully launched a counterforce revolution that locked in competitive advantages during the Reagan Administration.

Laying the groundwork for limited strategic options, Schlesinger moved aggressively to improve existing missiles and to program next-generation systems. Regarding the current Minuteman III ICBM, he advanced a new higher yield warhead and upgrades to the guidance system—which would enhance the lightweight missile's counterforce capability. He also proceeded with the next-generation ICBM and SLBM, the MX and Trident D5, whose heavier throw-weights embodied the large-payload hedge he had advocated in 1965. If the Kremlin

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[63] Marshall, *Reflections on Net Assessment,* op. cit., p. 132.

[64] Ibid., 146.

[65] *Nuclear Targeting Policy Review: Summary of Major Findings and Recommendations*, attachment to Secretary of Defense to the President, Nuclear Targeting Policy Review, November 28, 1978, available at https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2011-064-doc39.pdf.

[66] Harold Brown, *Department of Defense Annual Report for Fiscal Year 1981* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, January 29, 1980), p. 66.

[67] *Nuclear Targeting Policy Review*, op. cit.

[68] Andrew W. Marshall, interviewed by Alfred Goldberg and Maurice Matloff, *OSD Historical Office*, June 15, 1992, p. 39, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/oral_history/OH_Trans_MARSHALLAndrew06-15-92.pdf?ver=2018-04-10-070012-207.

[69] Defense Secretary Melvin Laird aspired to lead a precision-guidance revolution, but Congress thwarted his efforts. For his technological vision, see John D. Maurer, *Competitive Arms Control: Nixon, Kissinger, and SALT, 1969-72* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2022).

refused to reduce its payload advantage at the negotiating table, Schlesinger planned for the MX missile, equipped with 12 highly accurate warheads, to come online to render obsolete hardened Soviet silos. "The key issue, in terms of hardware," he recalled, "was for us to be confident that we could destroy all of their missile forces."[70] To round out the strategic modernization program, Schlesinger threw fierce support behind the troubled B-1 bomber, which developed out of McNamara's vetoed aircraft. A terrain-hugging bomber like the B-1, Schlesinger enthused, would "create uncertainty in Soviet attack and defense planning … and force large air defense expenditures which could otherwise be diverted to other more worrisome Soviet programs."[71] These strike systems would, in combination, bring credibility to limited strategic operations and drive up the cost for the Soviets to maintain valued investments.

To further amplify Soviet fears, Schlesinger laid the groundwork for regional nuclear forces capable of discriminate attacks deep within Soviet territory. Approving advanced development of the joint Navy/Air Force cruise missile program, he expected these air-breathing missiles to "impose on the Soviet Union large additional expenditures for air defenses to counter them."[72] Cruise missiles exploited the terrain contour matching (TERCOM) navigation system, which allowed for low-altitude penetration of radar-guided air defenses. "Our cruise missile technology," Schlesinger raved in a 1975 National Security Council meeting, "is far, far ahead of theirs with regard to accuracy. For the next decade, we will be alone in the ability to deploy our [TERCOM] very accurate guidance systems."[73] Schlesinger's deputy, William P. Clements,[74] emphasized this point, explaining to Kissinger that the cruise missile "will drive [the Soviets] up the wall because their defense will not protect them … and they know it."[75]

In keeping with Clements' spirit, Schlesinger also made the momentous decision to extend the range of the Pershing II ballistic missile, whose terminal guidance system dramatically improved accuracy.[76] The system's extended range would allow for deep strikes in the western Soviet military districts. Moreover, its ballistic flight profile would augment the low-flying cruise missile, expanding the range of azimuths and trajectories that Soviet air defenses would encounter. The Pershing II and multi-platform cruise missile, as

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[70] Quoted in Barrass, *The Great Cold War*, op. cit., p. 181.

[71] Memorandum from Schlesinger to President Ford, U.S. Strategic Forces, 4 December 1974, M. Todd Bennett, ed., *FRUS, 1969-1976: National Security Policy, 1973-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 2014), Vol. XXXV, p. 224.

[72] James R. Schlesinger, *Department of Defense Annual Report for Fiscal Year 1976* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, February 5, 1975), p. II-39.

[73] Minutes of NSC Meeting, September 17, 1975, GFPL, Digital Collections, National Security Adviser's NSC Meeting File, Box 2, available at https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0312/1552394.pdf.

[74] William P. Clements is rightfully known as the father of the modern cruise missile. See Clements National Security Papers Project: https://ns.clementspapers.org/william-p-clements-jr.

[75] Minutes of NSC meeting, July 25, 1975, GFPL Digital Collections, National Security Adviser's NSC Meeting File, Box 2, available at https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0312/1552393.pdf.

[76] Michael David Yaffe, *The Origins of the Tactical Nuclear Weapons Modernization Program, 1969-1979* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1991) Dissertation, pp. 553-554.

Schlesinger predicted, would compound the Kremlin's obsession with self-preservation and drive up the cost of defensive countermeasures.

After Schlesinger's dismissal in November 1975, his successors carried forth and operationalized his nuclear overhaul for strategic effect. In the mid-1980s, the Soviet leadership, to defend against the sophisticated strike assets that now bristled its vast border, ramped up spending on territorial air defenses, which increased by 8 percent.[77] The Reagan Administration had fielded the B-1 bomber, Pershing II, and multi-domain cruise missile, for which the Soviets had no answer. As a dejected Soviet planner later admitted to an American interlocutor, "our air defense systems were not designed to detect such missiles. You had hardly deployed 1/3 of these missiles and we were already compromising."[78] The Soviets subsequently signed, out of desperation, the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987, which banned all land-based long-range theater weapons but allowed the United States to retain its advantage in air- and sea-launched cruise missiles. As the Soviet general secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, warned the Soviet Politburo in 1986, "If we won't budge from the positions we've held for a long time, we will lose in the end."[79]

Regarding Schlesinger's ambition to render obsolete hardened Soviet silos, by the end of the 1970s, the Minuteman III was retrofitted with the larger-yield W78 warhead and had undergone guidance-system upgrades. These adjustments dramatically improved its hard-target-kill capability. And in 1986, the Reagan Administration began fielding the MX ICBM, the centerpiece of Schlesinger's counterforce revolution. In a paper that Marshall, still nestled in the Office of Net Assessment, received in 1981, the MX featured as a "cost-inflicting move" to "induce [the Soviets] to spend resources on more ICBM shelters, sea-based systems, or land mobile systems."[80] The MX deployment and Minuteman III upgrades accomplished just that: even as the Soviet economy teetered on the brink of collapse from its hulking defense burden, the Kremlin invested in a new class of mobile ICBMs to improve survivability.[81]

In the final years of the Soviet empire, Schlesinger's approach had thus moved the strategic competition into areas of U.S. advantage. Tailoring deterrence to Soviet values and behavioral tendencies had encouraged the Kremlin to devote more resources to defensive countermeasures even as it struggled to match the U.S. counterforce revolution. As Marshall Nikolai Ogarkov, chief of the Soviet General Staff, confessed to an American interlocutor in 1983, "The Cold War is over and you have won."[82]

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[77] Peter Westwick, *Stealth: The Secret Contest to Invent Invisible Aircraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 194.

[78] Danilevich interview in Hines, ed., *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, op. cit., p. 34.

[79] Anatoly Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), p. 84.

[80] H. Rowen, "Thoughts on MX," April 9, 1981, Henry S. Rowen Papers, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Box 43, MX Missile, 1981.

[81] John A. Battilega, "Soviet Military Thought and the U.S. Competitive Strategies Initiative," chapter in Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 119.

[82] Quoted in Chris Miller, *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2022), p. 159.

Conclusion

There are, generally, two opposing schools of thought concerning nuclear deterrence in the United States: an "easy deterrence" school—which depicts deterrence requirements as universal and predictable—and the "difficult deterrence" school—which emphasizes the broad attack options and capabilities required to deter distinctive adversaries.[83] Schlesinger's strategic sensibility favors the latter—and for a good reason.

America's victory in the Cold War strategic arms competition bears witness to the value and difficulty of "knowing your adversary." In the 1960s, McNamara's acceptance of the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction—the idea that the Soviets thought like the Americans—effectively restrained U.S. counterforce capabilities. If the Soviets shared the perception of a stalemated nuclear balance, if the Soviets accepted that competition was futile, logic dictated that deterrence requirements were predictable. Moreover, if the United States demonstrated restraint, the Soviets would follow suit and plan nuclear forces accordingly.

As Schlesinger understood, however, the Soviets held values and exhibited behavioral tendencies that diverged sharply from American strategic thought. Moscow did not abide by the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction—and planned nuclear forces accordingly. The Soviets, as Schlesinger later remarked, "did not tailor their forces to meet ours, and they probably would not have cut back if we had."[84] Nuclear deterrence was thus an unending process that demanded deep insight into the Soviet mindset. Targeting doctrine and force development, as such, needed to be tailored to Soviet perceptions.

Furthermore, given the unending nature of nuclear deterrence, Schlesinger's long-term perspective eschewing the idea of an action-reaction stalemate allowed the United States to exploit Soviet tendencies. A wise competitor would, as Schlesinger counseled, seize the initiative and steer the competition into favorable areas. Mutual Assured Destruction had not erased the superpowers' distinctive traits.

Notwithstanding the stark contrast between the Cold War and the present, Schlesinger's strategic sensibility illuminates three enduring lessons that can guide strategists today. First, knowing your enemy is a challenging yet vital and unending task. A strategic competitor will defy "rational" logic and exhibit perplexing behavioral tendencies. Second, investing in research programs on the adversary mindset is an urgent priority. It was, unfortunately, not until the latter years of the Cold War that the Office of Net Assessment had a robust empirical database on Soviet thinking. The United States can avoid this shortfall by adopting the 2023 Strategic Posture Commission's recommendation for "increased collection, processing, exploitation, and analysis on Chinese nuclear strategy, planning, and employment doctrine."[85]

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[83] The schools of deterrence are drawn from Keith B. Payne's work. See, for example, Keith B. Payne, "The Great Divide in U.S. Deterrence Thought," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2020), pp. 16-48.

[84] Schlesinger interview, October 29, 1991, in Hines, ed., *Soviet Intentions 1965-1985*, op. cit., p. 130.

[85] Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report*, op. cit., p. 24.

Third, given the array of modern threats and disruptive technologies, tailoring deterrence will confound even the most perceptive strategic analyst. Getting inside the mind of one peer rival was challenging enough in the Cold War. Today, however, the United States faces two great-power adversaries alongside lesser threats like North Korea and Iran. Disruptive technologies like artificial intelligence and cyber payloads inject further complexity into the deterrence equation. U.S. defense planners, then, would benefit from Schlesinger's counsel to hedge against uncertainty, as he had advocated with the large-payload ICBM and low-flying cruise missile in the mid-1960s.

Given the enduring nature of these lessons, strategic analysts grappling with today's challenges should attune themselves to Schlesinger's legacy. His strategic thought can help strategists navigate the emerging threat environment and manage an uncertain future. To ignore his strategic contributions would be to disown a tremendous comparative advantage.

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