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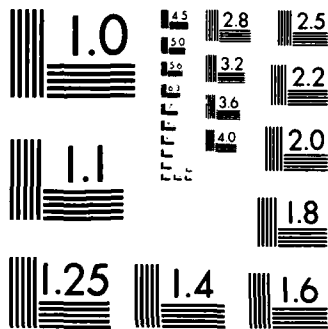
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Alex Alexiev

January 1985

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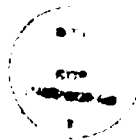
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Alex Alexiev

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January 1985



OF ARMS CONTROL, SUMMIT MEETINGS AND THE POLITICS OF MAKE-BELIEVE*

Although the intense publicity surrounding the Shultz-Gromyko preliminary meeting in Geneva will soon diminish, it is clear that arms control and relations with the Soviet Union in general will dominate the foreign political agenda of the Reagan administration in the next few years.

While this renewed emphasis could indeed facilitate the achievement of important foreign policy objectives, apart from being an astute move politically, it behooves the administration to explain to the public exactly what arms control can and cannot do. For it is not the failure of arms control that is one of the most serious foreign policy problems we are facing today but the failure to educate the American people in the realistic objectives and limitations of arms control and dispel the myth of arms control as a universal panacea for our security predicament, a myth tenaciously cultivated over the years by a small army of professional "arms controllers" and successive administrations opportunistically seeking short-term political gains.

So pervasive has this myth become, that a large segment of the political establishment and the American public have come to believe that the alternative to arms control is nuclear perdition and therefore any arms control agreement is better than no agreement at all. In fact nothing could be further from the truth and this "*arms control for the sake of arms control*" attitude, if allowed to dominate foreign policy considerations, could make a prudent national security policy impossible to pursue and ultimately undermine international stability.

Arms control advocates traditionally credit successful negotiations with three main achievements: 1) it is said that arms control alleviates tensions and contributes to peace and security in the international arena; 2) it creates a climate of trust and cooperation between the superpowers; 3) it can slow down and even reverse the arms

*A condensed version of this article appeared in the "Opinion" section of *The Register*, January 13, 1985.

race. Even a superficial look at the historical record shows clearly that arms control treaties have generally failed in achieving any of the above objectives. There have been four major arms control agreements in the modern era, the 1922 Naval Limitations Treaty of London, the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty and Salt I and Salt II of 1972 and 1979 respectively. Not one of these could be said to have contributed to lasting improvements in the international climate or, as far as the last two are concerned, to a positive change in the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Thus, the Non-Proliferation Treaty designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons was signed with great international hoopla by all those countries that either had the weapons already or were not capable of building them, but not by those that were both capable and willing to proliferate, which they promptly proceeded to do.

Salt I, described by President Nixon in euphoric terms as the beginning of the end of our conflict with the Soviets, was soon followed by an unprecedented show of Soviet intransigence and expansionism that as early as 1973 provoked a world-wide nuclear alert of U.S. forces and resulted in the establishment of Marxist regimes, more often than not by force, in South East Asia, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia and South Yemen. Nor was the 1979 Salt II treaty any exception in this respect with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the suppression of Solidarity and Soviet-Cuban involvement in the establishment of a Leninist regime in Nicaragua following in short order.

There is also very little evidence that arms control significantly circumscribes the arms race. So far the arms control experience shows that systems and programs subject to arms limitations tend to be those that the contracting parties may not be very keen on developing anyway. The best evidence of this is the fact that both the United States and the Soviet Union reportedly continue to abide by the provisions of the unratified Salt II treaty despite their accelerated defense buildups. It should be noted here that the alleged danger of an unchecked arms race leading to nuclear holocaust is one of the most specious, if seldom challenged, verities of the arms control mythology. The only arms races that have historically proven to be destabilizing, and dangerously so, have been unilateral rearmament efforts, such as the one by Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. A good case could be made that the present "race" in

which the United States has aimed to modernize its forces with a view of denying the Soviets any incentive for a first strike and any illusions of a victorious outcome in a nuclear exchange, has contributed to a much greater stability and a lesser danger of conflict than we had in the 1960s and 1970s. Nor is it true, as popular misconception holds, that nuclear modernization necessarily brings ever greater quantities of ever more destructive weapons. For instance, at present, the United States' nuclear arsenal has 8,000 fewer nuclear weapons, and a megatonnage that is 60 percent smaller than in the 1960s.

All of this does not mean that there are no important objectives that could be achieved through arms control. There are, and they should be pursued vigorously. For example, prudent arms control policies could help control some particularly destabilizing weapons systems and possibly bring about savings in military expenditures. Further, there are a whole spate of possible measures designed to facilitate the management of crises and reduce the risks of accidental war that need close attention. Arms control is and should remain a legitimate instrument of national security policies, but not by any means a cure-all for our complex adversarial relationship with the Soviets.

The greatest disservice that the arms control myth does to rational policy is that it reduces the ineluctable conflict between the two systems to the presence of nuclear weapons alone, thus implicitly suggesting that they are the cause rather than the symptom of the conflict. Yet nuclear weapons could only be instruments of conflict and, as any other weapon, are inanimate objects that are neither good nor evil but could become either depending on the objectives of the people using them. They become evil if used for intimidation and aggression and good if serving to deter such behavior. The United States, simply put, does not find itself in a conflict with the Soviet Union because they have nuclear weapons, but because we have good reasons to believe that they do not wish us well and cannot be trusted. No arms control agreement can change that unless there is change in the Soviet behavior that makes us distrust them in the first place. On the other hand, if we ever get to the point where we can trust them completely, arms control will become irrelevant. Great Britain, with its 64 submarine-launched nuclear missiles, has long had the capability

to devastate the United States, but not even the most ardent arms controllers would suggest that we need to be concerned about the British threat because Britain happens to be a trusted friend.

A related and even less realistic prescription for the problems of U.S.-Soviet relations than arms control is the current obsession with summit meetings. Early on in the last election campaign Walter Mondale raised the President's failure to meet with his Soviet counterpart to the status of a cardinal foreign policy sin and promised to hold annual summit meetings with the Kremlin if elected. In the Republican Party itself, two of its most prominent Senate leaders, Baker and Percy, urged the President to agree to a summit meeting without preconditions. Since then and especially after the Shultz-Gromyko meeting the public has been inundated with countless exhortations by pundits and politicians on the alleged benefits of summit conferences and many have probably started believing that summits are essential for better relations with Moscow.

Here, again, the history of diplomatic summits in general, and U.S.-Soviet ones in particular, presents a record so dismal that the distinguished American historian Gordon Craig has called them "one of the most unfortunate diplomatic inventions of the modern era." The normal difficulties of summiteering are exacerbated in the case of U.S.-Soviet meetings by the fact that such events in the West are almost always accompanied by a near carnival atmosphere and inordinately high expectations that can seldom be fulfilled. Yet the need to show tangible results to the public often leads to unwarranted and self-serving interpretations of the business accomplished at these meetings. Roosevelt, for instance, proclaimed the agreements reached at the Yalta and Tehran conferences during World War II as guaranteeing a democratic post-war order in Europe, while Stalin, with some justification, considered them a carte blanche to install communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In the 1972 meeting with Brezhnev, Nixon and Kissinger believed they had secured Soviet acquiescence to an international "code of behavior" while the Soviets saw the summit as an acknowledgment of their strategic equality with the United States, which created new opportunities for expansionism in the Third World. Again, in Helsinki in 1975 the West saw the summit agreements as a way to improve human rights in the Soviet bloc, while Moscow interpreted them as a formal

recognition of its sphere of influence and a Western pledge of non-interference in bloc affairs. Overall, from FDR's meetings with Stalin down to the Carter-Brezhnev summit kiss in Vienna in 1979 one would be hard pressed to find a summit that has produced lasting gains for the West and could unequivocally be termed a success. Thus, at least as far as U.S.-Soviet summits are concerned there would seem to be more than a grain of wisdom in Frederick the Great's admonition: "Heads of state should, whenever possible, avoid meeting each other."

This fetishism of arms control and summits that seems to have become an article of faith for many could perhaps be dismissed as a passing political fancy if it did not reflect a more deeply ingrained attitude on the part of important American elites who, in turn, exert powerful influence on the public perceptions of the Soviets: the belief that the other side shares our concepts of peace and security. The diplomatic corollary of this view is that, if there are problems in Soviet-American relations we are equally to blame for them and that there is nothing sufficient American good will and a few meetings cannot solve. From President Roosevelt who once described his formula for success in dealing with the Soviets as follows:

I have just a hunch that Stalin doesn't want anything but security for his country, and I think that if I give him everything I possibly can and ask nothing in return from him, noblesse oblige, he won't try to annex anything and will work for a world democracy and peace.

to President Carter who, shortly before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, said he knew the Soviet leaders to be as dedicated to peace as we are, this illusion has been persistently maintained, all the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

What accounts for this peculiar mind-set among responsible and otherwise well-informed people? Above all it is a fundamental misperception of the nature of the Soviet system and particularly its definition of security and the role of military power. To the United States and other democratic states national security essentially boils down to freedom from external threat and security policies are designed to neutralize such threats. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the

primary concern is the security of the political system. Looked at in conventional security terms the Soviets have an extremely favorable security situation. There is nobody that can threaten or invade the Soviet state or do much harm to it short of a suicidal nuclear attack. And yet there is a very real sense of insecurity among Soviet leaders, because they know very well that, while militarily strong, their system, based on coercion and an ossified ideology as it is, remains brittle. To that extent any threat to the system, whether it is internal or external, is in Soviet eyes a security threat writ large. A recent article by the top party watchdog in the Soviet military, General Alexei Yepishev, has provided an interesting insight into real Soviet security apprehensions. Denouncing what he calls American "aggression" against the Soviet Union, Yepishev lists the following threats which are said to create a "dangerous situation": Efforts to break the "monolithic unity" of Soviet society; the "subversive" campaign for human rights; attempts to "liquidate socialism in Poland"; slandering the nationalities policies of the CPSU and inciting nationalist feelings in the Baltic, Transcaucasian and Central Asian republics; and "sowing the poisonous seeds of religious fanaticism."

It is this Soviet systemic insecurity, ^{clearly} clearly exhibited in the above litany rather than any military threat ~~that~~ makes the establishment of a relationship of mutual trust and friendship with the West impossible, for the simple fact is that, short of a major internal democratization, the mere existence of the Western alternative presents a security threat to the Soviet system. This does not mean that we cannot have a stable and correct security relationship with Moscow. Despite the chasm that separates them, both superpowers are vitally interested in preventing nuclear conflagration, and a stable modus vivendi based on this overriding objective could and should be achieved. But such a relationship could be built only on the basis of a strong American defense capability and a sober and realistic strategy for dealing with the Kremlin, and not by means of the arms control panaceas and summit quick-fixes, advocated by the practitioners of the politics of make-believe.

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