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Is There A (New) Strategic Arms Race?

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In a series of excellent analyses in the 1970s, strategist Albert Wohlstetter challenged the conventional wisdom that the United States was the leading cause of an arms race with the Soviet Union.¹ Through a detailed empirical analysis of arms racing dynamics, Wohlstetter demonstrated that the United States was not the instigator of an arms race with the USSR. Likewise, Colin Gray, in several seminal publications, described how arms competitions are fueled by a plethora of unique national considerations.² They are not simply automatic reactions to the actions of others. It appears these lessons need to be relearned today.

In recent weeks, critics of the Trump Administration have been hyperventilating over assertions that the United States is instigating a new arms race with Russia. These critics assert that U.S. actions will invariably result in similar and dangerous Russian reactions that will jeopardize the security of the nation and, in fact, the world. The U.S. actions that will be responsible for triggering this impending disaster vary depending on the critic, but they generally include efforts to modernize the nation's aging nuclear deterrent, the perceived dismemberment of Cold War arms control regimes, and the possibility of a resumption of U.S. nuclear testing.



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The battle cry of today's critics mimics the assertions of those in previous decades who predicted that U.S. actions to fortify its strategic deterrent against adversary threats would be counterproductive and spark an arms race. Moreover, the corollary argument that U.S. strategic restraint would engender similar restraint on the part of opponents was also proffered as a rationalization for U.S. inaction.³ In reality, neither the action-reaction nor inaction-inaction models accurately reflect the historical record. Wohlstetter and Gray demonstrated this in the 1970s and their analyses have stood the test of time.

The notion of an uncontrollable action-reaction arms race predates the birth of the nuclear age. For example, by the end of the 19th century, Great Britain was the world's dominant sea power, but that dominance was under siege as continental powers challenged Britain for naval supremacy. Germany, most notably, began to build battleships to assert its own naval dominance. By the early 1900s, Britain's seafaring stature – patriotically embodied in the song, "Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves!" – was on the wane, with some in Britain conceding that "we have lost our [naval] superiority and are distinctly dropping to the rear."⁴

While British leaders debated how best to respond, some warned of the consequences of starting a naval arms race with Germany, calling concern over Germany's arming "naval scare-mongering."⁵ Consequently, Britain scaled back its naval armaments program. Yet Britain's restraint was not matched by Germany – quite the opposite, as Germany increased its warship production – demonstrating that inaction by one party does not necessarily lead to similar inaction on the part of others. In this case, Germany's actions helped fuel a quest for supremacy that led to the first truly global conflict of the 20th century – "the war to end all wars" – in 1914.

More than half a century later, a similar dynamic was in evidence as the United States sought (and indeed, welcomed) strategic "parity" with the Soviet Union while the Soviets forged ahead rapidly with an extensive nuclear buildup, intended – as former Harvard professor Ricard Pipes noted in the late 1970s – to provide them with the ability to fight and win a nuclear war if deterrence failed.⁶ The sophistry of the inaction-inaction paradigm was demonstrated by the unrealized expectation that U.S. restraint would engender similar Soviet restraint and was best captured by former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown when he stated: "When we build, they build; when we cut, they build."⁷

Of course, neither the United States nor other great powers make decisions on their respective nuclear postures in a vacuum. But the arms interactions that have occurred generally do not track with the simplistic supposition of a U.S.-led arms race. In some cases, adversaries have reacted to U.S. decisions in ways that were completely contrary to the expectations of those who believed the United States was initiating a new spiral in the arms race.

For example, the Soviet response to the Reagan Administration's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) – which was considered by critics to be the harbinger of an arms race in space and the



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death knell for arms control—was neither. In fact, it was the Reagan Administration that concluded the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which led (at the time) to the complete elimination of U.S. and Soviet ground-based, intermediate-range nuclear delivery systems. SDI was also credited as a major impetus toward Soviet reforms that contributed to the USSR’s ultimate demise. Nearly two decades later, Russia agreed to an arms control treaty that mandated the deepest reductions to date in strategic offensive nuclear arsenals—the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (“SORT,” or “Treaty of Moscow”)—only one month before the U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty took effect, freeing the United States to deploy an initial, missile defense capability against limited threats.

There are also examples where U.S. inaction—expected to set an example for others to follow—resulted in unexpected adversary reactions. For example, the U.S. decision to cap its ICBM deployments and forego strategic missile defenses after the ABM Treaty opened the door to an expansion of Soviet ICBM capabilities that could hold U.S. missile silos at risk. This Soviet action was contrary to what many predicted. One former senior U.S. official asserted at the time, “there would be little excuse for the Russians to continue building additional ICBM sites. In such a situation of frozen stable deterrence, they would not be needed.”⁸ Unclassified estimates indicate, however, that the growth in the Soviet nuclear weapons stockpile increased dramatically after the ABM Treaty was signed.⁹

Clearly, many of the traditional indicators of arms racing are not present when looking at U.S. nuclear programs. The United States has not built a new nuclear weapon or deployed a new nuclear delivery system in decades and has not conducted a nuclear explosive test since 1992. In fact, the U.S. nuclear stockpile today is at an historic low, having been reduced by more than 85 percent from its peak.¹⁰ The percentage of defense spending devoted to sustaining the U.S. nuclear arsenal is less than three percent—significantly smaller than during the modernization cycles of the 1960s and 1980s.¹¹ Even at the peak of the current modernization program, U.S. spending on nuclear weapons will remain a single digit percentage of the overall U.S. defense budget. Moreover, the increased focus on advanced conventional technologies like hypersonics reflects a continuing desire to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy. By contrast, Russia, China, and North Korea have forged ahead with their own nuclear weapons programs over the last two decades, building and deploying a variety of new nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

This stark contrast in approaches suggests that the answer to the question “Is there a new strategic arms race?” is emphatically “no”—or that if there is an arms race, the United States is not a participant.

In short, it is time to cast a skeptical eye on assertions that the United States is leading another round of the arms race and that U.S. actions will—like Newton’s third law of motion—



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inevitably spur reactions on the part of others. Such predictions have been wrong in the past and are equally specious today. They are based on a theory of international relations that ignores the various unique national considerations that factor into a leadership's armaments decisions – considerations expertly analyzed years ago by both Wohlstetter and Gray and that refute the simplistic action-reaction paradigm.

Today's critics would be well advised to go back and study their history lessons again.

1. See Albert Wohlstetter, "Is There a Strategic Arms Race?," *Foreign Policy*, No. 15, Summer 1974, pp. 3–20. Also see Albert Wohlstetter et al., "Is There a Strategic Arms Race? (II): Rivals but No 'Race,'" *Foreign Policy*, no. 16 (1974), pp. 48–92.
2. See, for example, Colin S. Gray, *The Soviet-American Arms Race* (Lexington, MA: Saxon House Studies, 1976); Colin S. Gray, "The Arms Race Is about Politics," *Foreign Policy*, no. 9 (1972), pp. 117–129; and Colin S. Gray, "The Arms Race Phenomenon," *World Politics*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1971), pp. 39–79.
3. For example, the 1994 *Nuclear Posture Review* noted that the United States would "demonstrate leadership" and "help shape [the] future" by "reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security" at a time when "the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, rather than the nuclear arsenal of a hostile superpower, poses the greatest security risk." See Department of Defense, News Release, "DoD Review Recommends Reduction in Nuclear Force," September 22, 1994, p. 2, available at <http://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/dodpr092294.pdf>. Also see Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review," (slides), September 22, 1994, available at <http://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/dodnprslides092294.pdf>.
4. Cited in Kenneth L. Moll, "Politics, Power, and Panic: Britain's 1909 Dreadnought 'Gap'," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 21, Fall 1965, p. 431.
5. Quoted in Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era 1904–1919, Volume I: The Road to War, 1904–1914* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1961), cited in *ibid.*, p. 438.
6. Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight & Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary*, July 1977, available at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/richard-pipes-2/why-the-soviet-union-thinks-it-could-fight-win-a-nuclear-war/>.
7. Testimony of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown before the Senate Budget Committee, 21 February 1979, reprinted in the *Congressional Record*, 21 February 1979, p. S1547.
8. Herbert Scoville, "Next Steps in Limiting Strategic Arms," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (March 1972), p. 11.
9. Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2013," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2013, Vol. 69, Issue 5, pp. 75–81, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1177/0096340213501363>.



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10. U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, pp. I, V, 6, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. XI, 51-52.

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