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The INF Treaty in Perspective: Trust and the Story of an Unlikely Success

Arms control and disarmament are above all matters of trust. This, in a nutshell, has been the essence of negotiating bilateral and multilateral treaties for almost a century. The INF Treaty of December 1987 is yet another example illustrating this insight. Had it not been for two leaders who, after a rough start in their mutual relationship, finally came to trust one another, Soviet and American intermediate-range missiles would never have been withdrawn from Europe and recycled into items for everyday consumption. Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev did the trick—to everyone's surprise at the time and to the lasting amazement of historians.[1]

In order to clarify disputed issues, it is helpful to debate history in reverse order. Turning our agenda on its head, we can and should ask a simple question: Why was disarmament a dead-end issue before 1987, and why did all efforts to substantially reduce the nuclear arsenal amount to nothing for 40 odd years? In other words: why was trust so disdained for all these decades? Why did mistrust and suspicion have such a paramount impact on national interests and international relations?

At first sight, it comes as little surprise that the Cold War was a hotbed for distrust. This is simply because distrust is either the offspring or twin (or in any case a close relative) of fear. For each and every decade between 1945 and 1991, we can make the case that, at its core, the Cold War was based on fear.[2] Time and again, it provides stories of how fear took hold of peoples' hearts and minds, about the manner in which societies coped with fear, and, last but not least, about the techniques used to exploit fear for political purposes, be it in domestic or global arenas. In dealing with the Cold War, historians are well advised to view their subject matter—be it diplomacy, cultural affairs or the military—through this lens. Political psychology not only provides additional insights; it takes us to the common denominator of the Cold War, namely to the political and social impact of insecurity, fear and mistrust.

1 Nicolas J. Wheeler, Joshua Baker, and Laura Considine, Trust or Verification? Accepting Vulnerability in the Making of the INF Treaty, in: Martin Klimke, Reinhild Kreis, and Christian F. Ostermann (eds.), Trust, But Verify. The Politics of Uncertainty and the Transformation of the Cold War Order, 1969–1991, Washington, D. C. 2016, pp. 121–139.

2 Bernd Greiner, Christian Th. Müller, and Dierk Walter (eds.), Angst im Kalten Krieg. Studien zum Kalten Krieg, Hamburg 2009.

Conventional wisdom has it that antagonistic ideologies and adverse self-images nourished distrust, and that they did so inevitably, and sometimes behind the backs of political actors, whether they were ill-intentioned or well-meaning. There is, indeed, ample evidence to vindicate this reading. Just think of Joseph Stalin's urge to speed up the development of Soviet atomic weapons, a decision grounded in the unwavering belief that inter-imperialist contradictions in combination with an outright hatred of Socialism would unleash another world war in 20 or 30 years' time.[3] Or think of the widespread perception, popularized by Henry Kissinger in his 1957 book on *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, of both the Soviet Union and Communist China as "illegitimate powers" who could and should never be trusted, no matter when and no matter why: allegedly, they were aiming to destabilize and upset the international order forever. "Diplomats can still meet," Kissinger claimed in a dogmatic diatribe, "but they cannot persuade each other. Instead, diplomatic conferences become elaborate stage plays which seek to influence and win over public opinion in other nations; their purpose is less the settlement of disputes than the definition of issues for which to contend. They are less a forum for negotiation than a platform for propaganda."[4] Please note the publisher's comment when a 1984 reprint of this book came out, three short years before the INF Treaty: "Dr. Kissinger's masterful account is as relevant today as when it was first published for the Council on Foreign Relations in 1957."[5] No matter how ill-informed this judgement was, it is all too obvious how Cold War perceptions were poisoned by ideology, prejudice and bias.

And yet I suggest we take a different perspective on the historical setting of the INF Treaty. Important as they were, ideological controversies are not sufficient in themselves to explain the dynamics of distrust and trust. Something else needs to be added to the factors considered—an accelerant that stirred up contested issues and turned divergent interests into non-negotiable assets. This is where the nuclear arms race comes into play. Without it, the root, scope, and momentum of distrust cannot be appreciated; without it, the history of Cold War foreign relations fades away into an opaque twilight zone. The arms race fed on distrust, and vice versa, both of them promoting an entangled history of self-fulfilling prophecies. It is therefore quite appropriate to suggest a clear-cut assumption that, if any single factor captures the essence of the Cold War, it is the presence of nuclear weapons and the fears they unleashed.

3 David Holloway, Stalin and the Bomb. The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956, Yale 1994.

4 Henry Kissinger, Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy, New York 1957, p. 318.

5 Westview Encore Edition, Boulder, Co. 1984, Publisher's Comment.

1. Weapons Technology and Distrust

Atomic weapons technology has been identified as a source of mutual suspicion, bewilderment and distrust. And rightly so. Ever since the nuclear genie left its bottle, the rate of technological innovations moved into fast-track mode. Revolutionary breakthroughs came no longer in decades, but, rather, in years—with thermonuclear H-bombs coming on the heels of atomic prototypes, with intercontinental ballistic missiles augmenting the fleet of long-range bombers and with satellites exploiting outer space as auxiliary battleground. Neither side could rest assured that rivals and potential enemies were not on the verge of yet another revolution in military weaponry. Neither side could make the case that its arsenal was designed and deployed for defensive purposes only. With each technological gain, the line of demarcation between offensive and defensive weapons became ever more blurred.[6]

Take the infamous MIRV warheads—multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles—as a case in point. Introduced in 1969, they fueled mutual distrust not only because of their increased number of warheads. The broad range of new and unprecedented military options they made available nourished an anxiety on the verge of paranoia. Mainly, people feared the contingency of massive launches made either in retaliation or as first strikes, either in response to an attack or in an attempt to disarm the other side before it could attack. The number of equally telling samples is unfailing—from MIRV to ABM (anti-ballistic missiles), from ABM to SDI (the Strategic Defense Initiative), from SDI to nuclear-tipped Cruise Missiles. No matter which we single out, the motivation behind it all boils down to the same—a deep-rooted mistrust that investments in technology might signal aggressive designs or that, in times of crisis, any given rival might be tempted to overbid his cards.

Consequently, a striving for ever more sophisticated weapons, even a quest for outright military superiority, became the political routine and was routinely justified as basic for national security. Speaking for the U.S., Henry Kissinger did not mince his words in a 1958 essay published in *Foreign Affairs*: the defending side—also known as "the West"—must be equipped with more and better weapons to counterbalance an aggressor's surprise move. American superiority in arms was not up for negotiation and should never be mistaken as a bargaining chip for trust-builders.[7] Ironically enough, in 1976, when Kissinger, as Secretary of State, wanted to eat his words and promote arms control, he was undercut by hard-core conservatives from within and without the "Committee

6 Fred Kaplan, The Bomb. Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War, New York 2020; Lawrence Freedman, The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy, London 1989.

7 Henry Kissinger, Missiles and the Western Alliance, in: Foreign Affairs 36/3 (1958), pp. 383–400.

on the Present Danger," whose agenda was first and foremost built on suspicion and fear, with revitalized superiority as the antidote.[8] Once again, the vicious cycle of mutual distrust was confirmed. It would have sounded like a political pipedream to imagine that, roughly ten years later, an agreement would be signed scrapping a whole generation of nuclear weapons.

Disarmament seemed all the more a pastime for dreamers because the dominant elite of self-proclaimed nuclear realists had subscribed to a worst-case logic. This notorious Cold War-style thinking was written in stone for decades, its basic principles promoted by think tanks, universities, and unknown numbers of defense intellectuals. By definition, reliability, confidence and trust were barred from worst-case models, no matter what their design. This was especially true of its most radical form popularized from the mid-1950s, and rejuvenated in the "war on terror" after 9/11: the so-called "One Percent Doctrine". This was built on the notion that a one per cent possibility should always be perceived as a one hundred per cent probability. In other words, it was assumed that miniscule dangers could turn into existential threats at any time and place, all the more so when the competition was with inscrutable rivals like the USSR or Communist China. The likelihood of any given "threat" scenario was not the issue; the thinking was that literally nothing should be excluded from the imagination. This was the logic of a pro-active security policy: dangers should be fought off before they actually took shape and before they could be proven by solid evidence. By definition, therefore, inaction was more risky than actually taking risks. That it was once again Henry Kissinger who promulgated this rationale in his seminal study on *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* tells us a story—not only a story about deeply enshrined academic paradigms, but above all a story about having the lowest possible expectations of trust in international relations, and of unfailing resourcefulness in arguing the case for distrust. Generations of policy and security strategists knew no better; and, with minor exceptions, did not want to know better.

At this point one might legitimately object, and argue that nuclear weapons generated "negative trust," namely a shared assumption that, out of sheer self-interest, rivals, or even enemies, would refrain from getting carried away. There is, indeed, ample evidence that leaders on both sides of the Iron Curtain had a keen understanding of the limited scope they had for military action. Whichever power employed nuclear weapons invited its own self-destruction. In 1954, at the latest, after the United States had conducted a series of thermonuclear tests in the South Pacific, reports to the President were unequivocal in their conclusion that "super bombs" could wipe out human life from Planet Earth. Dwight D. Eisenhower's public comment about "race suicide" was endorsed by Winston

8 Justin Vaïsse, Neoconservatism. The Biography of a Movement, Harvard 2010; Jerry W. Sanders, Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment, New York 1983.

Churchill and Kremlin leaders alike.[9] "Our probable adversaries feared us just as we feared them," Nikita Khrushchev noted in his memoirs, and he is also on record as telling American officials that "nearly everyone knew that war was unacceptable and that coexistence was elementary."[10] In sharp contrast to pre-nuclear times, when a combination of arms races and political crisis more often than not escalated into military confrontations, the post-1945 world did not see any great power wars. Hence, the popular proverb of the time, "First shooters are second to die," was more than mere folklore: in the nuclear age, all actors could trust in their rivals' mirror-imaged perspective—or in their common rationality.

There is, however, a flipside to this story and an ambiguity all too often ignored or papered over. Neither side believed that nuclear war was impossible; but all sides bent over backwards to be permanently prepared for the unimaginable. This observation identifies the second source of deep-rooted distrust: war-plan options masterminded by military elites and signed off by their political superiors.

2. Nuclear Strategies and Distrust

Since the early 1980s, ample documentary evidence on contingency war plans has been available on the American side.[11] Compared with the density of Pentagon, White House, and National Security Council records, available resources from Soviet archives are only fragmentary. But, taken as a whole, documents from both sides conclusively verify a set of mirror-imaged assumptions about nuclear war and allegedly successful strategies to prevail and win should deterrence fail.[12] Two questions provided a common East–West denominator for war-planners: Was it possible to completely disarm the other side? Or could damage be inflicted on the enemy that was sufficient at least to curtail a counterstrike and thus avoid unacceptable losses for one's own society?

For American Strategic Air Command planners in the 1950s, "the idea of a single war-winning blow was an irresistible temptation," David Alan Rosenberg notes in a seminal study on the origins of overkill.[13] Internal discussions and paperwork were rife with talk about a nuclear "Blitzkrieg" and fantasies about preventive wars turning the Soviet Union into a radioactive ruin within hours. It is true that President Dwight D. Eisenhower rebuffed his most hawkish advisors

9 David Holloway, Nuclear Weapons and the Escalation of the Cold War, 1945–1962, in: Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. 1: Origins, Cambridge 2010, pp. 383–386.

10 Nikita Khrushchev, in: David Holloway, Racing toward Armageddon? Soviet Views of Strategic Nuclear War, 1955–1972, Unpublished Manuscript, July 2017, p. 7.

11 Fred Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon, New York 1983.

12 Holloway, Nuclear Weapons and the Escalation of the Cold War.

13 David Alan Rosenberg, The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960, in: International Security 7/4 (1983), p. 36.

and sidelined the idea of a Pearl Harbor in reverse. He did, however, confirm a National Security Council guideline, in effect since October 1953, stating that, in the event of hostilities, the United States would consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions and that in peacetime the U.S. must make clear its determination to prevail if general war should eventuate.[14] "Prevail" and "survive" were key terms of the 1959 Presidential guidance, which in years to come also informed the war-plans of the Kennedy Administration and the McNamara Pentagon. Until the mid-1970s, prevailing and surviving in case of war was predicated on one option—the delivery of a quick and devastating blow if intelligence should detect Soviet war preparations. This, in other words, was a strategy of pre-emption, or of striking first, in a grey-area of more or less solid information about the other side's intentions.[15]

That Soviet leaders excelled as copy-cats of pre-emption most certainly contributed to the war of nerves and to the inflation of mutual distrust. Whether they explicitly referred to the term or not is of minor importance. In essence, Party declarations, open-source publications, and internal debates testify to the fact that Soviet rocket forces were poised to strike against American missile silos and strategic aviation and forward-based systems. Their purpose was to disarm the other side and they needed to be launched pre-emptively to secure victory and survival. Ironically, this option seemed all the more attractive against the backdrop of major technical and military shortcomings. For a long time, and with good reason, the Soviets had been worried about the efficiency of their air defense system as well as their capacity to retaliate against a U.S. attack. Without any verifiable reason, they also feared a Barbarossa-style attack conducted with superior American arms. Thus it was Soviet weakness that promoted a strategy the other side perceived as indicative of aggressive designs—a suspicion only increased by public bragging that another world war would see the Red Army victorious over moribund imperialism. To quote from a 1964 internal study directed by Defense Minister Rodion Y. Malinovsky: "The conditions of nuclear war […] present us with the alternative: either the offensive or defeat." And from that perspective, striking first was "the chief form of nuclear war fighting."[16] For what all this was worth, it at least kept the illusion of containing war-damage alive.

In the 1970s, both sides refrained from pre-emptive strategies and gravitated to launch-on-warning or launch-under-attack postures.[17] But the preponder-

14 Holloway, Nuclear Weapons and the Escalation of the Cold War, p. 385; Bernd Greiner, Politik am Rande des Abgrunds? Die Außen- und Militärpolitik der USA im Kalten Krieg, Heilbronn 1986, pp. 55–73.

15 William Burr and David Alan Rosenberg, Nuclear Competition in an Era of Stalemate, 1963–1975, in: Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. 2: Crises and Détente, Cambridge 2010, pp. 95, 104.

16 Quoted in: Holloway, Racing toward Armageddon?, p. 11; see ibid, pp. 12 f., p. 16; Burr and Rosenberg, Nuclear Competition, p. 97.

17 Holloway, Racing toward Armageddon?, pp. 19, 26; Burr and Rosenberg, Nuclear Competition, pp. 96, 105.

ance of mistrust remained. The technological race for ever more refined nuclear weapons continued, and delivery systems of unprecedented target precision were devised. These innovations went hand in glove with drastically reduced warning times against an impending attack. Because of this, the specter of disarming first strikes was reanimated, and the notion of mutual assured destruction was once more called into question by fantasies of "limited damage" and "survival." Strategy was continually couched in ill-defined, murky and risky terms. In the end this nourished completely preposterous ideas like the Soviet "Dead Hand" system. In the early 1980s, measuring devices sensitive to pressure, light, and radiation were installed all over the USSR and programed to execute a fully automatic counterstrike in response to a U.S.-orchestrated decapitation of the Soviet leadership.[18] "Doomsday Machine" would have been an appropriate code name for it, as an exact replication of a device in Stanley Kubrick's movie *Dr. Strangelove*.

All told, during the Cold War the nuclear powers were the hostages of suspicion, insinuation and mistrust. Fully aware of the apocalyptic impact of another total war, political and military elites declared a nuclear taboo. And yet they sponsored "as if" investments, strategies, and force postures—as if the devaluation of military power could be reversed, as if technological breakthroughs could offer a way out of the nuclear dilemma, as if, in the event of war, they could limit the damage, prevail, and ultimately win. Day in, day out, the "unthinkable" was not only reflected on, but was also seen as something possible. Hence the Eisenhower Administration toyed with the idea of employing nuclear weapons on three occasions: during the war in Korea, at the time of the siege of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, and when there was conflict over the Chinese offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu;[19] John F. Kennedy and his advisors, too, debated

18 David E. Hoffman, The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy, New York 2009; The 1983 War Scare: "The Last Paroxysm" of the Cold War, Part I, National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book 426, Interviews with Lieutenant General Gelii V. Batenin, ed. by Nate Jones, Document 23, p. 10; Viktor M. Surikov and Colonel Varfolomei V. Korobushin, ibid., Document 7, p. 135 and Document 24, p. 107.

19 Richard K. Betts, Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance, Brookings Institution 1987, pp. 63–93; Fred Kaplan, The Bomb. Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War, New York, 2020, pp. 9, 103–106, 201. For more details on the Korean war, see Phil Williams, Donald Goldstein, and Henry Andrews (eds.), Security in Korea: War, Stalemate, and Negotiation, Boulder, Co. 1994, pp. 153–158; Roger Dingman, Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War, in: International Security 3 (1988), pp. 50–91; Carl A. Posey, How the Korean War Almost Went Nuclear, in: Air&Space Magazine, July 2015, pp. 15–23. For more details on Dien Bien Phu see Ronald H. Spector, Advice and Support. The Early Years, 1941–1960: The United States Army in Vietnam, Washington, D.C./Center of Military History 1983, pp. 211–216; Frederic Logevall, "We might give them a few." Did the US Offer to Drop Atom Bombs at Dien Bien Phu?, in: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, February 2, 2016, pp. 8–12; Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy, Cambridge 2017, pp. 182–184; John Prados, Operation Vulture: America's Dien

pre-emptive options during the Berlin Crisis of 1961.[20] In the words of former Secretary of State Dean Rusk: "We can't assume nuclear war won't happen." There was just no certainty in "this God damn poker game."[21] As in a poker game, you might be apprehensive, but your fear must never be perceived as anxiety. Intimidating the other side was always the better choice.

Henry Kissinger got to the heart of the "God damn poker game" in his 1957 book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*: "The key problem of present-day strategy is to devise a spectrum of capabilities with which to resist Soviet challenges. These capabilities should enable us to confront the opponent with contingencies from which he can extricate himself *only* by all-out war, while deterring him from this step by a superior retaliatory capacity." And he added in even bolder words: "The side which is more willing to risk an all-out war or can convince its opponent of its greater readiness to run that risk is in the stronger position." This strategy "will not be easy to implement. […] Above all, it requires strong nerves. […] Its effectiveness will depend on our willingness to face up to the risks of Armageddon."[22] Keep in mind that this plea for strong nerves was much more than a young professor's unsolicited contribution; it reflected the intellectual mainstream in America's major foreign policy think tank at the time, the Council on Foreign Relations.

Whether you call it "war of nerves," "atomic blackmail," "atomic diplomacy," or simply "deterrence" is immaterial in the end. No matter what, it boiled down to a simple, yet sweeping message: though militarily unusable, nuclear weapons were tools for political and diplomatic leverage. Leaders on both sides of the Iron Curtain were at one with each other in the shared conviction that a nuclear threat posture was needed if they were to play a central role in world affairs. Nuclear weapons were the currency of status, prestige, and global power, the means to prevent others from overextending their influence and to demonstrate national assertiveness. They were a power booster in constant need of being recharged. Grinding this blunt weapon seemed to be the inevitable order of the new age. It was based on an ancient rationale: whoever refrains from threats of force and military engagements demonstrates political impotence and bids goodbye to vital interests; but those willing to move into the grey areas of intimidation and uncertainty can extend their scope of action—and all the more so if they convey the impression that events might actually get out of hand. Needless to point out,

Bien Phu, New York 2014, pp. 91–98; Rebecca Grant, Dien Bien Phu, in: Air Force Magazine, January 8, 2004, pp. 18–21. For more details on the the Quemoy-Matsu-crisis, see Gordon H. Chang, To the Nuclear Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Quemoy-Matsu-Crisis, in: International Security 4 (1988), pp. 96–123.

20 Marc Trachtenberg, A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963, Princeton 1999, p. 183; Lawrence Freedman, Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam, New York 2000, p. 97; Kaplan, The Bomb, pp. 51–63.

21 Burr and Rosenberg, Nuclear Competition, p. 90. Andrei Sakharov argued alike. See Holloway, Racing toward Armageddon?, p. 29.

22 Kissinger, Nuclear Weapons, pp. 144, 168, 173 (emphasis ibid.).

a policy of making outspoken nuclear threats was a risky one. But the risk was accepted, if not welcomed. It goes without saying that its price tag was chronic mistrust.[23]

3. "Atomic Diplomacy" and Distrust

Neither side was ever ready to provoke, much less to unleash, nuclear war. The mutually shared policy of deterrence, however, was a mind game, born in fear, which had to perpetuate fear to drive its point home. In the 1950s, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles therefore defined Cold War statecraft as a war of nerves—as the art of approaching the abyss and holding your adversary in suspense about the borderline between a policy of reckless gambling and mere bluff. Vyacheslav Molotov and Nikita Khrushchev argued likewise. Molotov's active advice was to keep the opposite side under permanent pressure, but always be conscious of personal limits. And in 1958 Khrushchev claimed that "the people with the strongest nerves will be the winners. That is the most important consideration in the power struggle of our time. The people with weak nerves will go to the wall."[24] On various occasions John F. Kennedy followed suit and, to cite a 1962 interview as a case in point, publicly toyed with the idea of a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union should America's "vital interests" be challenged.[25] Needless to say, any definition of what actually constituted "vital interests" was kept in limbo. Up to the early 1980s, both sides employed such strategies of psychological attrition time and again.

Because of this, the sheer presence of nuclear weapons and attending fantasies rank prominently in the history of Cold War crises. Certainly, the manifold confrontations of the time cannot be measured by the same yardstick: events in Berlin, Korea, Suez, Congo, Cuba, Vietnam, Egypt, Syria and Israel, Angola, Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa not only occurred in different settings, they followed their own patterns of logic. Yet there was a common background noise: a feeling of uncertainty, suspicion and mistrust. No actor could be confident that the other side would respect red lines; each side tended to "overload the enemy" without knowing how its coded language of power would eventually be deciphered and understood. That some protagonists lived on an overdose of rational actor-logic was no comfort—indeed, quite the opposite, as a conversation of January 1973 between Henry Kissinger and Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's Ambassador to Washington, illustrates. Lecturing his guest about the intertwined workings of

23 See Jeremi Suri, Logiken der atomaren Abschreckung oder Politik mit der Bombe, in: Bernd Greiner, Christian Th. Müller, and Dierk Walter (eds.), Krisen im Kalten Krieg, Studien zum Kalten Krieg, Band 2, Hamburg 2008, p. 34; Burr and Rosenberg, Nuclear competition, pp. 91 f.

24 Holloway, Nuclear Weapons, pp. 382, 392.

25 Bernd Greiner, Die Kuba-Krise. Die Welt an der Schwelle zum Atomkrieg, Munich 2010, p. 37.

force and diplomacy, Kissinger maintained that exceeding the limit by 30 per cent was better than to fall short by five per cent, and that, whenever force was either threatened or applied, a slightly hysterical reaction would do the trick.[26] This was another, and arguably the most precise, shorthand for "atomic diplomacy" and distrust in the Cold War.

Buttressing the credibility of nuclear weapons shaped foreign policy and crisis-management throughout the period. Alternatively, debunking the usefulness of nuclear power was also an option. In both respects, the Berlin Crisis of 1948, the Korean War, the Suez Affair, and the Cuban Missile Crisis are telling examples. In July 1948, weeks after the Soviets had imposed a blockade on West Berlin, President Harry S. Truman dispatched B-29 bombers to Europe. Beyond the walls of the Pentagon and the White House nobody was aware that these planes had not been modified to carry atomic weapons and that the American stockpile at the time was miniscule. However, the rest of the world was to be led to believe in American steadfastness and that it retained the option to go nuclear anytime.[27] For fear of seeming weak and inviting further pressure, Stalin sought refuge in a forward strategy of his own: stand your ground, do not give in, offer no compromise. Clearly, a similar rationale was in play in early 1950. Whatever really motivated Stalin to give Kim Il Sung the green light to attack South Korea, atomic diplomacy loomed large—if only to demonstrate the sheer ineffectiveness of America's nuclear superiority.

The matchless master in this game was Nikita Khrushchev. His threats of missile attacks on London, Paris, and Tel Aviv in early November 1956, his defiance of the West once more over Berlin, and his deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba all amounted to outright bluff. But, to him, exposing the other side's vulnerability and calling its credibility into question always seemed worth the effort. As is well known, Khrushchev was kicked out of office in 1964 on a charge of political adventurism—an allegation which did not stop his rivals from following in his footsteps. Leonid Brezhnev lost no time in pronouncing the new rulers' reading of the Cuban Missile Crisis: never again would they allow the United States to humiliate the Soviet Union with a superior nuclear force. Another round in the armaments race was set off; once again a superpower took a run to sharpen its arsenal of blunt weapons.

To cut a long crisis-story short, we can conclude that nuclear weapons prodded the United States and the Soviet Union into competition for a superior power-rating. As historian Jeremi Suri states, both raised geopolitical claims, incurred liabilities and took risks beyond the means of non-nuclear powers. Again, one of the most famous authorities to attest to this claim is Henry Kissinger. Without nuclear threats, he contended in a much acclaimed essay for *Foreign Affairs*, the United States would forgo any chance to rewrite the global map in its

26 Suri, Logiken der atomaren Abschreckung, p. 40.
27 Greiner, Politik am Rande des Abgrunds?, pp. 61 ff.

favor.[28] As Special Consultant for National Security from 1969 to 1975 and Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977, Kissinger followed his own advice, making use of nuclear weapons for political coercion. On three occasions, he and President Richard M. Nixon applied the so-called "Madman Theory"—a policy of feigned madness to bring the Soviets into line. During the Vietnam peace negotiations, the Jordan Crisis in 1970, and the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, American armed forces were put on high levels of alert despite the risk of inadvertent escalation. Nuclear weapons were an incentive to the superpowers to overdraw their political accounts and to enter into contests over power and influence in literally every corner of the world.[29] This was the perfect recipe for perpetuating distrust: threatening the worst at places and times of their own choosing, merely for the sake of being on eye-level with the other side, undermining its credibility, or giving it a dose of its own medicine.

In contrast, we might refer to the policy of détente and arms control agreements like SALT (the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) as successful moves towards a trust- and confidence-based security policy—or at least as attempts to defuse the toxic legacy of nuclear weapons. Admittedly, the 1970s saw a loosening of the old, deep-seated patterns of mutual distrust. Especially in Europe, an easing of tensions proved durable and contributed in multiple ways to the eventual demise of the Cold War.[30] When we focus on U.S.–Soviet relations, however, the record looks less bright. Arrival at a lasting policy shift was compromised in many ways: Nixon and Kissinger saw détente as a subtle form of anti-Soviet containment; the Soviets in turn seized on every opportunity to gain ground in the Third World; and even moderate plans for arms control drew heavy fire from American conservatives and fear-mongers who fantasized about "windows of vulnerability" and Soviet first-strike capabilities. In 1979, when SALT II was locked in stalemate, "atomic diplomacy" had its latest comeback.[31]

4. Distrust Writ Large: The Early 1980s

Again in the early 1980s, we witness the interplay of all too familiar patterns. First, technological progress and the modernization of nuclear weapons increased. Second, another chapter in a policy of fear was staged by the Reagan Administration during its first term. Just recall the political rhetoric of that time. Secretary of State Alexander Haig is on record making the infamous claim that there are

28 Henry Kissinger, Military Policy and Defense of the 'Grey Areas', in: Foreign Affairs 33/3 (1955), pp. 416–428.

29 Suri, Logiken der atomaren Abschreckung, pp. 27, 31.

30 Matthias Peter, Die Bundesrepublik im KSZE-Prozess, 1975–1983. Die Umkehrung der Diplomatie, Berlin/Boston 2015.

31 Arvid Schors, Doppelter Boden. Die SALT-Verhandlungen 1963–1979, Göttingen 2016.

more important things than living in peace.[32] President Ronald Reagan put the disposal of Communism to the rubbish dump of history as the top item on his foreign policy agenda—a logical extension of his belief that Communism stood for a bizarre chapter in human history which had outlived itself.[33] And, according to Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, if deterrence should fail, the U.S. should be able to wage and win an all-out nuclear war.[34] Maintaining the traditional Cold War mirror-imaging, the Soviets responded in kind. The Communist Party's Secretary General, Yuri Andropov, charged the U.S. with following in Nazi-Germany's "Blitzkrieg" footsteps and cited Hiroshima as an instance of American unscrupulousness. In the words of a close Andropov advisor: "Here comes the recipe for total war against the Soviet Union and its allies."[35]

Month after month, Pentagon officials disseminated bizarre ideas about surviving Armageddon. Respective contingency plans were leaked to the press—not by whistleblowers, but by government insiders and their intellectual consultants. A variety of troubling documents saw the light of day: Jimmy Carter's "Presidential Directive 59,"[36] two "National Security Decision Directives" by Ronald Reagan,[37] the "Fiscal Year 1984–88 Defense Guidance," and, to top it all, parts of the "Single Integrated Operation Plan No. 6" or "SIOP 6."[38] Different as they were in topic and range, all these memoranda had one crucial item in common: they envisioned protracted atomic wars and fine-tuned nuclear exchanges. The authors of the "Fiscal Year 1984–88 Defense Guidance," for instance, postulated "plans to prevail against the Soviet Union on all levels of conflict, be it insurgen-

32 "If we make just the maintenance of peace alone […] the raison d'etre on the core of our policy deliberations, I'm afraid we're going to bring about […] the destruction of the very objective we've established for ourselves: peace. There are things that we Americans must be willing to fight for. I know this republic was spawned by armed conflict […]. It was Patrick Henry who stated 'give me liberty or give me death'. […] Clearly, in the nuclear age the responsibilities in this area become all the more awesome. But the point I wanted to make is, there are things worth fighting for. We must understand that. We must structure our policy under that credible and justified premise." Alexander Haig, Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on his nomination as Secretary of State, Washington, D.C., January 9, 1981, in: The New York Times, Major Points From Appearance by Haig Before Senate Committee, January 10, 1981, Section 1, p. 9.

33 Ronald Reagan, Address to the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando/Florida, March 3, 1983, in: Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik 28/10 (1983), pp. 994–1001, here pp. 1000 f.

34 United States Information Service, Wireless Bulletin, June 18, 1981.

35 Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik 27/11 (1982), p. 1137; see also Dima Adamsky, The 1983 Nuclear Crisis—Lessons for Deterrence Theory and Practice, in: Journal of Strategic Studies 36/1 (2013), pp. 18, 22.

36 For Presidential Directive (PD) 59 "Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy" from July 25, 1980 see https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/pd/pd59.pdf.

37 For an overview of Reagan's National Security Decision Directives see https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/index.html.

38 William M. Arkin, Why SIOP-6?, in: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 39/4 (1983), p. 9.

cies or nuclear war."[39] And, in this same vein in the summer of 1980, the editors of the mainstream magazine *Foreign Policy* published an article headlined "Victory is Possible," and with it the scenario of a nuclear war waged to deny the Soviet Union an extended sphere of influence.[40]

However preposterous all this may sound, it also points to a political-military twilight zone at the core of the "Second Cold War." Beyond belligerent verbal skirmishes played out in the open, the superpowers engaged in a military war of nerves. For the Soviet Union, the main places to contain Western power and influence were Afghanistan and Poland. For the United States, "psychological operations" or so-called "psyops" were the means of choice. Time and again, American intelligence and military operations were staged with an ulterior motive in mind: to make a convincing case that the Soviet Union could not adequately defend its airspace and coastline, that its early warning systems were outdated and that, in case of war, American forces would get a head start. U. S. bomber wings repeatedly flew mock-attacks against the Soviet homeland veering away only within seconds from its borders; in September 1981, American warships sneaked into the Barents Sea near Murmansk unnoticed by Soviet radar; navy fighters deployed for naval exercise "Fleetex 83" in the vicinity of the Kurile islands repeatedly entered Soviet airspace.[41]

Keep it in mind that the United States did not intend to provoke, much less to unleash, a nuclear war. The plan was that the Soviet leadership should henceforth live in fear—fear of both the capacity and the disposition of the United States to carry out devastating "decapitation strikes" against centers of political and military command, control and communication. The Soviets should be kept in doubt over when and why the United States might push the button, and should stay tenuous in its judgement of what Washington's decision-making body was thinking. Showering all kinds of troubling and dubious information on Moscow was at the core of this psychological warfare strategy. The more you intimidate an adversary, the more you extend your own scope of action: this mantra-like slogan was maintained for years.[42]

Inadvertent risks accompanying this show of force were all too obvious. In the summer of 1983, Soviet border forces had become increasingly edgy because of intensified U. S. missions probing Moscow's air defense facilities—on average, 70 close approaches per month. When, in the early hours of September 1, a U. S. reconnaissance plane again drew near to the Soviet defense zone over Sachalin and crossed the flight path of a civilian Korean carrier, military air-controllers made a fateful identification error and ordered missile-fire on KAL 007, killing

39 Fiscal Year 1984–88 Defense Guidance, in: The New York Times, May 30, 1982, and Blätter für deutsche und international Politik 27/10 (1982), pp. 1011–1016.

40 Colin S. Gray and Keith Payne, Victory is Possible, in: Foreign Policy 39/10 (1980), pp. 14–27.

41 Seymour M. Hersh, The Target is Destroyed: What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What America Knew About It, New York 1986.

42 Adamsky, 1983 Nuclear Crisis, pp. 11, 23, 24.

269 people. This was not the only misjudgement made during this time, but it was the first with tragic ramifications. U.S. officials, including the President, kept on charging the Soviets with wanton murder and terror, even after being supplied by their own intelligence network with evidence to the contrary.[43] Even superb intelligence did not count; instead, deeply entrenched anti-Soviet emotions, prejudices, and mindsets carried the day, only increased by the prospect of winning an easy propaganda victory over Moscow. Perpetuating traditional patterns on their side, the Soviets responded in kind: to retaliate for Washington's show of force, they announced an increase in the number of Soviet submarine-based missiles targeted at the United States. Within days, U.S.–Soviet relations had sunk to their lowest point since the Cuba Missile Crisis.

KAL 007 was still in international headlines, when, unnoticed by the public, potentially disastrous incidents happened elsewhere. On September 26, shortly after midnight, a red alert was set off in a military reconnaissance installation south of Moscow. A space-based satellite system called "Oko" signaled the approach of five American intercontinental ballistic missiles against the Soviet homeland. 17 minutes passed before ground radar operators verified a malfunction in the system. In all probability, air controllers had been led astray by a combination of trivial circumstances—computer sensors had presumably confused cloud-reflected sunrays in the sky above an American airbase with the red tail of an airborne missile.[44]

In early November 1983, there was again ample reason for bewilderment, misinterpretation, and distrust on account of dubious signals sent off by NATO's command post exercise "Able Archer." In a way that differed from similar exercises in the past, all levels of escalation from conventional to nuclear war were rehearsed; and, departing from previous understandings, the orders for launching nuclear weapons were camouflaged in codes indecipherable by Soviet services.[45] It is true that "Able Archer" was nothing but an exercise; but against the backdrop of long-standing saber-rattling, it could also have been interpreted as a smokescreen for an imminent attack. Whatever it was meant to signal, there can be no dispute that it occasioned a runway alert for a number of Soviet nuclear fighter jets deployed in East Germany, a combat alert for some Soviet ground units in Eastern Europe and an enhanced readiness alert for a variety of Soviet ICBMs. Some historians claim that Moscow's war scare put world peace on a razor's edge; others interpret these Soviet countermeasures as yet another example of the Cold War's routine mirror-imaging: nuclear impression-management on one side

43 Hersh, The Target is Destroyed.

44 Interview with Stanislav Petrov, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, February 19, 2013, p. 7.

45 Benjamin B. Fischer, A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare, Washington, D.C. 1997, pp. 6–10; Len Scott, Intelligence and the Risk of Nuclear War: Able Archer-83 Revisited, in: Intelligence and National Security 22/6 (2011), p. 767; Klaas Voß, Die Enden der Parabel. Die Nuklearwaffenübung Able Archer im Krisenjahr 1983, in: Mittelweg 36 23/1 (2015), pp. 73–92.

provoking responses in kind from the other.[46] Be that as it may, “Able Archer” testifies to deep-rooted distrust and to a political fabric that encouraged crisis escalation, inadvertent decision-making, and potentially even war.

5. The Demise of “Old Thinking”

To dub 1983 “the most dangerous year of the Cold War” is certainly way off the mark,[47] but the early 1980s certainly qualify as yet another twilight zone of nuclear bravado and deep-seated mistrust. The atmosphere in the ranks of the Moscow Politburo and Soviet military and intelligence services deepened into a brooding anticipation of war. Whether Andropov actually believed in his slogan of an impending “nuclear Barbarossa” or not, nobody can tell for sure. But in terms of military hardware, it looked as if the U.S. was about to build up an uncatchable advantage, To some observers, its combination of sophisticated computer technology with new MX intercontinental and Pershing II intermediate-range missiles amounted to a veritable first-strike capability; and the endless blustering about “limited nuclear wars” and “decapitating strikes” aroused suspicion that an overly power-confident United States might be tempted to overbid its stakes in future crises and to engage in escalating modes of confrontation. This is why Andropov, along with the military Chief of Staff Nikolai Ogarkov, and Secretary of State Andrei Gromyko, time and again referred back to the summer of 1941. For all its propagandistic maneuvering, the “Barbarossa” generation of Moscow’s *nomenklatura* was genuinely concerned. According to the first-hand evidence of observers, the officials had not been so edgy at any time since the Cuba Missile Crisis in late 1962.[48]

With this as the background, it comes as little surprise that the Kremlin intensified its emergency preparations. It did so most notably in an endeavor dating back to 1981 which had the codename “RYAN” (shorthand for *Raketno-Yadernoe Napadenie*, or “Nuclear Missile Attack”). This involved a sweeping attempt by Soviet and Eastern European intelligence services to collect data that

46 Mark Kramer, Die Nicht-Krise um ‘Able Archer 1983’: Fürchtete die sowjetische Führung tatsächlich einen atomaren Großangriff im Herbst 1983?, in: Oliver Bange and Bernd Lemke (eds.), Wege zur Wiedervereinigung. Die beiden deutschen Staaten in ihren Bündnissen 1970 bis 1990, Munich 2013, pp. 129–150; Vojtech Mastny, ‘Able Archer’: An der Schwelle zum Atomkrieg?, in: Greiner, Müller, and Walter (eds.), Krisen im Kalten Krieg, pp. 505–523.

47 Georg Schild, 1983. Das gefährlichste Jahr des Kalten Krieges, Paderborn 2013; Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte, #15, “1983: The Most Dangerous Year of the Cold War?”, https://www.berlinercolloquien.de/colloquien/1983-the-most-dangerous-year-of-the-cold-war/index.html.

48 Nate Jones (ed.), The 1983 War Scare, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book 426, Interview with Lieutenant General Gelii V. Batenin, Document 23, p. 10; see also Document 24, pp. 106f and Beatrice Heuser, The Soviet Response to the Euromissile Crisis, 1982–83, in: Leopoldo Nuti (ed.), The Crisis of Détente in Europe. From Helsinki to Gorbachev 1975–1985, London 2008, pp. 137–149.

might possibly indicate the coming of a Western nuclear attack: information on troop movements, radio traffic, police activities, daily schedules of high-ranking politicians and military leaders, emergency scenarios for hospitals, call-ups for blood donations, long working hours in ministries of defense, even the activities of military chaplains. Though many aspects of operation "RYAN" are still unknown, the operation testifies to the rampant distrust of the time.

Again, the metaphor of nuclear weapons as the Cold War's game-changer seems appropriate. Even though political leaders understood the difference between threat and action, they time and again underrated the political and psychological price of nuclear brinkmanship, especially the potential for miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. Nuclear weapons did not, as such, create post-1945 tensions, but they certainly made conflicts ever more contentious by feeding fear, suspicion and mistrust, if not outright paranoia. It is hard to imagine any other force-multiplier of political controversies so powerful and persistent. Despite the effectiveness of nuclear weapons in deterring outright war, they stimulated international crises; and even though they set limits to the Cold War itself, they kept the confrontation alive.[49]

Against the backdrop of these cycles, which at the time seemed carved in stone, the abolition of an entire generation of nuclear weapons, agreed upon in the INF Treaty of 1987 is one of the most remarkable achievements in all Cold War History. It should encourage historians to readjust their analytical focus—away from the well-documented history of distrust to the delicate and little understood dynamics of positive trust-building.

49 Suri, Logiken der atomaren Abschreckung, p. 46; Holloway, Nuclear Weapons, pp. 380, 396.