

Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) I and II

The Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) refers to two arms control treaties—SALT I and SALT II—that were negotiated over ten years, from 1969 to 1979. The two treaties became the basis of all subsequent arms control agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union. SALT I was signed in 1972, and SALT II in 1979. The first one was ratified by both sides; the second one was observed without being ratified.

SALT I

The negotiations on SALT I began in November 1969 as a result of the new tendency toward détente in U.S.–Soviet relations. Negotiations became possible partly due the fact that the Soviet Union was nearing the state of strategic parity with the United States by the late 1960s as a result of Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev’s comprehensive armament program. The Soviet Union was on the verge of pulling ahead of the United States in ICBM launchers, and the United States was actively engaged in developing the multiple independently targeted reentry vehicle (MIRV) technology, which, as the name implies, allows multiple warheads on a single missile.

Both sides recognized that without agreed limits, the nuclear arms race threatened international stability and imposed significant economic costs on both countries. On the U.S. side, the willingness to enter the negotiations was also related to the ongoing conflict in Vietnam, and the U.S. officials’ hope to enlist Soviet help in dealing with the North Vietnamese. Henry Kissinger, Pres. Richard Nixon’s national security adviser and, from 1973, the secretary of state, employed the strategy of linkage in the negotiations, which sought to relate the progress on SALT to Soviet concessions on other issues of priority to the United States such as the conflicts in the Middle East

and Vietnam. This strategy was resented by the Soviet negotiators as efforts to pressure the Soviet Union into concessions.

The SALT negotiations were the first negotiations between the two superpowers, which made an effort to limit strategic nuclear weapons with the stated goal of reducing the level of armaments to curb the nuclear arms race in the Cold War. As such, the tasks before the negotiators were vast. The negotiations covered the entire triad of strategic nuclear weapons: intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and strategic bombers. Although presented as a major breakthrough in arms control, the treaty did not reduce any armaments; in fact, it only froze the number of nuclear weapons at the levels existing at the time on both sides. One of the main drawbacks of the treaty was that it did not address the most destabilizing issue at the time—the MIRV technology, leaving it outside the treaty limits.

This technology allowed the side that employed it to increase the actual throw weight (deliverable nuclear firepower) many times without actually adding any new launchers. Difficult to verify, the missiles equipped with MIRV technology made the nuclear balance less predictable and therefore less stable. At the time when the treaty was signed, in 1972, the MIRV technology gave advantage to the United States, because the Soviet Union was falling far behind the U.S. in this area. However, potentially, it was the Soviets who could gain most from this technology because of the Soviet Union's bigger ICBMs.

Signed on May 26, 1972, during President Nixon's visit to Moscow, SALT I (the Interim Agreement) limited both sides to the existing number of ICBMs for the next five years (while subsequent negotiations would set permanent limits for both sides). The Soviet Union was permitted to have 1,618 ICBMs and 950 SLBMs. The United States was permitted to have 1,054 ICBMs and 710 SLBMs. However, since the treaty did not limit the MIRV technology, the United States was permitted to maintain and strengthen its advantage in warheads over the Soviet Union: Strategic bombers were also left outside of the treaty—an issue to be resolved in the next stage of negotiations.

In SALT I, U.S. negotiators accepted the Soviet condition for verification—“by national technical means” only, which later became one of the most difficult issues in arms control negotiations. It meant that the spy satellites would be the only means of verification, without any inspections of compliance.

SALT I was seen by both sides as part of a comprehensive set of agreements regulating nuclear offensive and defensive armaments, even though SALT I (and SALT II) neglected a crucial consideration for the Soviet side: nuclear weapons in Europe capable of reaching the Soviet territory, (that is, U.S. forward-based systems, and national nuclear forces of Great Britain and France, members of NATO). Along with SALT I, the U.S. and Soviet leaders signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty limiting strategic defenses, which in the future came to be perceived as a cornerstone of nuclear balance by both sides.

SALT II

SALT I ushered in the era of U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations. SALT II negotiations began soon after the signing of SALT I. The Interim Agreement was intended to expire in 1977. However, the negotiations were more difficult than expected, which reflected the increasing tensions in U.S.-Soviet relations, and U.S. domestic political problems. After President Nixon resigned in 1974, Gerald Ford moved quickly on SALT II, picking up where Nixon and Brezhnev left it. In late November 1974, Ford and Brezhnev met in the Soviet Far East, near the city of Vladivostok and negotiated the basic framework of the treaty.

The Soviet Union made a significant concession in Vladivostok by agreeing to the overall ceiling of 2,400 strategic launchers (including ICBMs, SLBMs, and strategic bombers), of which 1,320 could be equipped with MIRV technology, while not counting either forward-based systems or the nuclear weapons of other members of NATO. In an unusual move, showing the great importance Brezhnev assigned to reaching an agreement, the Soviet leader challenged his Minister of Defense, Andrei Grechko, who protested against Brezhnev's agreement not to count the forward-based systems and British and French nuclear weapons. According to Deputy Foreign Minister Georgi Kornienko "had to spill political blood" over Vladivostok.

The issues left unresolved at Vladivostok were the principle of counting the strategic bombers and the air-launched cruise missile, which were seen as technical issues soon to be resolved. Both sides expected to sign the treaty soon afterwards. Instead, the progress was significantly slowed down first by Brezhnev's stroke, and then by the negative U.S. domestic reaction to the

signing of the Helsinki Final Act, which confirmed the post-war borders in Europe and was seen as a concession to the Soviet Union. By 1976, the presidential campaign, in which détente with the Soviet Union was one of the central issues, made finalizing the treaty impossible.

The administration of Jimmy Carter came to power with an intention to move quickly on arms control, and achieve not just limitations but a significant reduction of nuclear weapons. Contrary to the Soviet leaders' expectations, the new administration did not feel committed to the Vladivostok framework and the understandings reached there. Rather than signing SALT II on the basis of Vladivostok, and moving on to the next stage of arms reductions, Carter and his National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski decided to abandon the framework and present bold new proposals for deep reductions in the nuclear arsenals.

The proposals were presented against the last-minute advice of a veteran negotiator and experienced diplomat Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, during Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's visit to Moscow in March 1977. In addition to disregarding the Vladivostok framework, which was of high personal importance to Brezhnev, the U.S. proposals were seen by the Soviet leadership as very one-sided. The U.S. proposals would have virtually eliminated the core of the Soviet strategic triad—its heavy land-based ICBMs, which were seen as the most destabilizing weapon by the new administration. By the proposed limits, the Soviet Union would be required to cut disproportionately more weapons than the United States. The Soviet side rejected Carter's initiative out of hand, without even advancing a proposal of their own.

The Soviet position was to return to the Vladivostok framework, quickly sign SALT II at an early summit in 1977, and to proceed to negotiating a SALT III treaty. In their effort to persuade the United States to sign SALT II before the expiration of SALT I, the Soviet side linked the summit meeting to the signing of SALT II and therefore, an opportunity of an early summit was missed. After the debacle of Vance's visit in March 1977, the progress on SALT slowed down and became victim of the rising tensions in U.S.-Soviet relations, due mostly to the Soviet renewed activism in the Third World, and to the Carter human rights policy, which was seen as interference in Soviet internal affairs by the Brezhnev leadership and resented as such. Negotiations were also undermined by Brezhnev's rapidly deteriorating health, which precluded his active role in the process.

The SALT II treaty was eventually signed in July 1979 at a U.S.-Soviet summit in Vienna, which became the first and only summit between Carter and Brezhnev. SALT II treaty returned to the outline contained in the Vladivostok Accords in many respects. The treaty established two aggregate ceilings on strategic launchers (each side could determine the precise combination of ICBMs, SLBMs and strategic bombers): until 1981 the number was to be 2,400, after 1981 the number would be 2,250. The number of launchers equipped with MIRV technology would be 1,320, strategic bombers fitted with air-launched cruise missiles were counted as one such launcher. Total number of ICBMs with more than one warhead (MIRV) could be no more than 820. The treaty also determined the maximum number of warheads that could be fitted on one MIRV-equipped launcher: 10 on ICBMs, 14 on SLBMs, and 28 cruise missiles on each

strategic bomber. On the issue of verification, the treaty left the old provision carried over from SALT I—by national means only.

SALT II was beneficial for both sides in that it stabilized the nuclear balance, slowed down the arms race at least in the categories of weapons that it covered, and preserved the strong points of each country's nuclear strategic triad that it wanted to preserve. Thus it allowed the Soviet Union to keep 308 of its most valued nuclear weapon—the heavy ICBM SS-18. In the long run, after 1981, the Soviet Union had to dismantle more weapons than the United States and stop more of the existing nuclear programs. However, it retained its advantage in throw-weight due to its bigger missiles and was allowed not to count its "Backfire" bomber as a strategic bomber. The United States retained its advantage in the total number of warheads (because of higher limits on the number of warheads placed on submarines and the allowed number of cruise missiles), and it did not have to reduce the number of its bombers stationed in Europe capable of reaching the Soviet Union.

The chances of SALT II ratification by the U.S. Senate were not very high even at the moment when it was signed. They were harmed even more by a fiasco of an alleged discovery of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba in August 1979. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter withdrew the treaty in January 1980 rather than risking its rejection by the Senate, or imposition of amendments, which in all likelihood would have been unacceptable to the Soviets. The failure to ratify SALT II signified the collapse of U.S.-Soviet détente, which by the early 1980 was already

severely undermined by the Soviet assertive foreign policy and domestic developments in both countries.

SALT I and SALT II treaties became the key agreements that for the first time put limits on nuclear arms race between the superpower rivals in the Cold War. Their importance lies not only in the fact that they limited the number of armaments the Soviet Union and the United States could deploy, but also in that they provided a conduit for a political and military dialogue between the two countries. The negotiations that lasted for ten years produced a generation of skilled arms control negotiators who had a firm grasp of technical detail and experience dealing with the opponent. The understandings and compromises achieved during the negotiations became the basis on which all subsequent arms control agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union and later Russia were built. Although SALT II was not ratified in the U.S, both countries observed the limits set by the treaty. SALT I and II should be seen as the first set of comprehensive accords, which allowed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) negotiations to begin and succeed under Gorbachev.