The Survivability Problem

The purpose of a major strategic arms agreement should not be to implement a slogan, to flatter the ego of an outgoing administration or to require us to bet our whole strategic future on a gamble, such as early SDI deployment. The purpose should be to improve strategic stability—in simplest terms, to reduce the risk of nuclear war. Yet the administration seems committed to measures in the fast-moving strategic arms negotiations that could decrease stability and damage our allies’ confidence in our deterrent.

ICBMs. In such circumstances, eight or so submarines are very few baskets in which to put the nation’s entire survivable strategic nuclear deterrent. This is especially alarming when one looks at a Soviet Two-Stage ICBM capability. It is the president’s responsibility to ensure that our nation has a survivable ICBM force in such an environment. But in spite of the threat, the administration is busily abandoning the mobile ICBM, both by its effort to ban mobiles in a strategic arms agreement and by its willingness to let funding for its own small mobile ICBM program be undermined by some of its own officials and by its friends in Congress.

The result of these developments will be, in the relatively near future, a vulnerable land-based ICBM and bomber force and only a few submarines to carry our whole survivable strategic deterrent. In these circumstances we are driven toward one of two choices: decide now to bet that we will be able to deploy survivable, effective, affordable defenses against ballistic and cruise missiles, or that we will adopt the policy of launching ICBMs on warning alone. The first approach is fraught with technical uncertainty; the second risks accidental nuclear war in case of a false alarm and has been resisted for decades by all thoughtful political and military experts.

There is some dissatisfaction in the Senate with the forthcoming INF treaty. But for those concerned about deterrence and strategic stability, that treaty is the wrong target. The INF accord has been handled in such a way as to create substantial political problems for NATO, but with the right follow-up approach to NATO modernization and arms control, such problems can be satisfactorily resolved. The INF treaty does, above all, lead us to understand the need to consult closely with our allies long before committing ourselves to an agreement, as well as the danger of making proposals whose principal merit is the expectation that the Soviets will reject them. But the downside risk of continuing strategic negotiations is far greater than that of the INF treaty. Without changes in the current administration’s policies that are creating the survivability problem, the United States could well be on the verge of committing itself to a strategic treaty that many moderate members of Congress and thoughtful citizens will reluctantly conclude, is clearly contrary to the national interest.