
**Review by Matthew Ambrose, Independent Scholar**

John Maurer’s “Divided Counsels” synthesizes two emerging strains of scholarship. The article assesses the development of the Nixon administration’s position in the strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) while identifying the influence of a particular strain of U.S. strategic thought (which he calls “competitive strategies” (353)) among a number of Nixon administration policymakers. Maurer claims that the “competitive strategies” school of thought represents a distinct, holistic approach to arms control; one which saw negotiations as another area of competition and therefore sought to leverage SALT to preserve or extend U.S. advantage. The argument is bold and inventive. If the article has a weakness it is perhaps that it only takes the reader through the development of the first U.S. SALT proposal, and ends before the proposal was presented to the Soviets. In other words, it stops just as the story gets interesting. The real test of Maurer’s argument about an alternative, holistic approach to arms control will come with future work detailing the interactions with the other side of the table.

Maurer ably summarizes the diplomatic and theoretical work that underpinned the drive for nuclear arms control through the 1960s. Work by the economist Thomas Schelling and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara formed the foundation of the ‘assured destruction’ school of thought. This group tended to view nuclear weapons as useless beyond a certain point, and feared that a runaway arms race would exacerbate tensions, invite miscalculation, and pose a threat to stability.

Maurer also tracks a parallel strain of thought which saw the emerging nuclear rivalry as a slower, multi-dimensional competition rather than a linear ‘race,’ and saw nuclear weapons, and possibly even a margin of superiority, as necessary to hold Soviet power in check. This ‘competitive strategies’ school of thought developed out of institutions such as the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) and RAND Corporation.

According to Maurer, both schools of thought held that arms control negotiations, including the nascent SALT initiative, were a worthwhile endeavor in their own right. Among ‘assured destruction’ thinkers, negotiation and coordination were the key tools to stop the race and start moving toward a more stable balance of nuclear forces. Maurer states that ‘competitive strategies’ advocates instead saw the negotiation as
an opportunity to close off areas of competition where the United States might struggle, and instead subtly
direct it into areas where the United States could remain dominant (360-361).

Both of these approaches found their adherents within the Nixon administration in 1969, and Maurer argues
that President Richard Nixon’s desire not tip his hand and lean too heavily to the competitive-strategies side
of the debate was a major factor in the months which elapsed before the U.S. government had an actual
proposal to table for the SALT negotiations. Again and again, Maurer shows how some individuals within the
administration argued for specific positions on anti-ballistic missiles, multiple-warhead missiles, or the timing
of the negotiations, not in order to protect strategic stability, but rather to provide a competitive advantage to
the United States.

It is easy to see how the United States had pursued its own advantage in prior arms control agreements despite
their purportedly equal terms. The 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, for instance, banned open-air nuclear
testing despite the United States having had a five-year head start and therefore a greater body of knowledge
than the Soviet Union at that time. The 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty served U.S. interests (though
Soviet ones as well) by thwarting the emergence of future nuclear competitors.

One wonders, however, whether Maurer is assigning intentionality to what is essentially a structural outcome.
Distrust with the very concept of arms control was widespread among policy players such as the Joint Chiefs
of Staff, or among the Department of Defense’s civilian leadership. Over time it became clear these groups
were loath to support any SALT proposal that they could not construe as preserving or extending an
advantage. Did they support a given arms control proposal because they believed in the utility of arms control
as a strategic tool? Would they have pursued it in a vacuum, i.e., in the absence of the pressures for an
agreement from the public, the international community, and ‘assured destruction’ advocates? Or was it
instead an attempt to protect their bureaucratic interests and strategic priorities from a policy initiative they
were at best neutral towards, and in some cases actively sought to undermine? While the ‘competitive
strategies’ framework might fit for members of the SALT delegation like Harold Brown or Paul Nitze, how
well does it fit individuals like Lieutenant General Edward Rowny or perennial SALT critic (and future
Assistant Secretary of Defense) Richard Perle?

Also interesting is that Maurer lists then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger as among the
‘competitive strategies’ cohort. Kissinger was no doubt keenly aware of the capabilities in which the United
States led and in which it lagged, and these factors influenced his positions on SALT. To be sure, Kissinger
did not fit within the ‘assured destruction’ school in 1969. But it was not long before Kissinger revealed
himself to be out of sync with ‘competitive strategies’ thinking as well. By 1974, frustrated with questions
about the impact of SALT policies, Kissinger retorted, “what in the name of God is strategic superiority?
What is the significance of it?…What do you do with it?”¹

In all of this discussion, one name looms large: long-time Director of the Office of Net Assessment Andrew
Marshall. Maurer identifies Marshall as among the most influential founders of the ‘competitive strategies’
movement, in arms control and elsewhere. Maurer’s work is part of a growing literature on net assessment and

¹ Henry Kissinger, as quoted in Henry Kissinger, Years of Upheaval (Boston: Little, Brown and Company,
1982), 1175.
competitive strategies that was occasioned, at least in part, by Marshall’s retirement in 2015 and his passing in March of this year. Over the course of decades, Marshall developed a reputation as an inveterate behind-the-scenes bureaucrat and an almost oracular strategic analyst. Generations of defense policy makers passed through his office on the way to higher ranks, and his legend grew. No doubt many of these acolytes and former protégés have found themselves wondering what the legacy of the famously publicity-shy Marshall will be. In response, a wave of scholarship and commentary about Marshall, net assessment, and competitive strategies has emerged in recent years, ranging from the hagiographic to the occasionally critical.

Marshall’s influence on U.S. strategic policy was real, and likely under-appreciated until recently. But as with many intellectual histories, it is easy to weave a web of connections rendering the subject indispensable to what were actually highly contingent outcomes. For example, Maurer works hard to show how the imprimatur of ‘competitive strategies’ can be found among the Nixon administration’s early deliberations. In so doing, he must admit that “the competitive strategies approach’s formal theory emerged after the practical negotiations had already begun” (362), which is to say, several years after the period he examines. This is based on the fact that Marshall’s seminal work on long-term competitive strategies against the Soviet Union was only published in 1972. It is difficult to show that a wide-ranging group of people acted according to an internally consistent set of ideas before those dictates had been codified.

Maurer’s article presents itself as a first chapter, an opening act of sorts, but the argument might have been stronger had he presented this episode as a prologue. It is important to remember that SALT in 1969 was an unprecedented exercise. Hardened battle lines had yet to be drawn, and many of the main players were very much learning as they went. Where Nixon administration officials seemed to break with the precepts of the ‘assured destruction’ approach, this was not necessarily the implementation of a well-considered strategy. Maurer’s argument would be on surer footing if he instead presented these episodes as diffuse, uncoordinated reactions to the broader political and strategic environment. Reactions that Marshall’s 1972 work could well have catalyzed into a more coherent and consistent alternative to the dominant ‘assured destruction’ approach.

Despite these criticisms, this article shows that there is still a great deal of fruitful historical work to be performed in the realm of Cold War arms control. Maurer’s approach of putting the United States’ long-term competitive interests at the center of his analysis will yield considerable dividends if it is applied to the rest of

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the SALT negotiations. The declassification of U.S. documents in recent years has contributed to a number of new studies of the nuclear arms control controversies of the detente era. Maurer’s analysis, if it is continued to its logical endpoint, will likely earn a place within this literature as well.

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