

**Commentary: Arms Race Myths vs.
Strategic Competition's Reality**

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“All this is familiar, but is it true?” was Albert Wohlstetter’s response to widely accepted ideas about the U.S.-Soviet arms race in 1976, ideas he proceeded to demolish—but only after adumbrating them with a precision that eluded the officials, academics, and intellectuals who held them.

Racing Forward? Or Ambling Back? (1976) was vintage Wohlstetter: precise, masterfully argued with clarity, logic, masses of evidence, wry humor, and great elegance. Albert puts the arguments he knocks down far better than their adherents, sharpening the vague notions that formed the core of thinking about arms control into well-defined propositions that could be tested against the evidence, the facts and logic on which they were based.

Of course, he had been doing this for years, examining complex issues by breaking them down into their components, testing those components, gathering all the available relevant facts (and doing basic, original research to establish facts that were not readily available), reading everything connected to the subject, and rendering the whole into a rich, original, and rigorous analysis.

In an unpublished note, Albert points to the importance of philosopher Karl Popper’s insistence that meaningful statements must be open to disconfirmation. As Albert put it: “If a statement cannot conceivably be refuted by any observation or test, it has no meaning. Such statements are impregnable but empty.”¹ He regarded the vague provisions commonly found in arms control agreements as dangerously empty because they were too imprecise to be tested. From this observation he concluded—and subsequent history proved him right—that it would be extraordinarily difficult to reach clear and convincing conclusions about arms control violations, even when they occurred.

While Albert’s focus was principally on the nuclear arms control agreements of the 1970s and 1980s, the pitfalls of vaguely worded agreements—an inability to verify and therefore to force

compliance—are as relevant to deals with Iran or North Korea today as they were for deals with the Soviets during the Cold War.

Albert was at his best when the conventional thinking he challenged was most widely accepted: the greater the number of proponents, especially if they were widely read and admired, the more pleasure Albert took in the rigorous examination, and frequent refutation, of their views. And when he could group a gaggle of respected commentators into a chorus singing from the same flawed sheet of music, he did so with good-natured glee. That is why in *Racing Forward? Or Ambling Back?* he quoted so many “experts” saying the same thing. After all, two or three quotations from Morton Halperin or Jeremy Stone would have sufficed to demonstrate that conventional thinking about the “arms race” held it to be the product of over-estimation and reciprocal over-reaction. He hardly needed to add statements to the same effect from Jerome Wiesner, Leonard Rodberg, Herbert Scoville, Leslie Gelb, Robert McNamara, Stanley Hoffman, and Paul Warnke. But these were *the* authorities in the arms control field, and Albert was determined to corral them all before leading them to slaughter.

For Albert, the field of “arms control” was almost wholly lacking in intellectual content. The popular press, drawing its information from conventionally thinking “experts,” had largely succeeded in establishing the “fact” of a U.S.-Soviet arms race in the minds of policymakers as well as the broad public. Albert understood that the arms race theorists’ underlying misconception would make it difficult to gain support for policies that could enhance American safety and security. So while he enjoyed demonstrating that there was in fact no such thing as a spiraling “arms race,” he regarded the belief that there was as deadly serious. If a mistaken belief in a mythical mechanism called the “arms race” meant that the United States might not make prudent investments in secure and discriminate strategic forces, or might turn to fragile agreements rather than measures of self-defense, well, he would have to begin at the beginning and put the concept of the “arms race” under the microscope.

And what a sharp, rigorous element his microscope had. Take, for example, Albert’s treatment of the issue of over or under prediction of Soviet nuclear forces. Contrary to the widely held belief that we had chronically under-estimated the future size of Soviet arsenals, Albert’s meticulous audit shows the opposite. Having won the point, he goes on to tease out and dissect yet

another error—the mistaken belief among those who grudgingly acknowledged a history of *under*-estimations—that estimates got better with time and experience. This apparent but wrong finding was the product of a flawed methodology, which he takes pains to explain:

Some analysts now grant that we underestimated, but claim that we improved with time. They ignore the important difference between predicting a *cumulative* total of vehicles that will have been deployed at some future time, most of which are known to be already completed or in process at the time when the prediction is made, and predicting a *change* from this known state. This accurately-known past makes up an increasing portion of the cumulative total. Nonetheless, those who detect an improvement in forecasts compare predicted with actual totals, not predicted with actual change from what was known; and so swamp unpredicted new starts in the steadily increasing total of launchers known to be started or completed.

Albert was intrigued by the pattern of under-estimation he so carefully documented and searched for an explanation. When he found it, he put it succinctly:

Part of the pressure to conform by underestimating was very likely a reflex, over-correcting for the “missile gap” that had publicly embarrassed the intelligence community.

Re-reading that, I could not help thinking of the December 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran’s nuclear weapons program. Could the intelligence community be over-correcting for the infamous 2003 Iraq NIE that caused the nation and the world such grief? And if Albert were alive and serving on the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, as he once did, would the CIA and the other intelligence agencies have gotten away with the Iraq estimate in the first place? Or the Iran estimate now?

As a member of the Pentagon’s Defense Policy Board, I sat through a number of intelligence briefings following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Some of them had to do with Iraq and

its weapons of mass destruction. Now, with the advantage of hindsight, I can see how imprecision about what we actually *knew* – as opposed to what we believed could be reliably *inferred* – led to the mistaken conclusion that Iraq had a stockpile of weapons of mass destruction. The careless acceptance in the Iraq NIE of information that required establishing the reliability of informants was not inevitable. But the now famous case in which an Iraqi defector in Germany was never interviewed by U.S. intelligence, leaving his false claims simply taken at face value, would have astonished even Albert, who was a frequent critic of intelligence estimates. Albert served on the Defense Policy Board for many years, but not as the nation contemplated its response to 9/11.

We will never know whether his relentless questioning of everything and everyone would have teased out the hidden assumptions and flawed inferences in the Iraq NIE. (Or, for that matter, whether he would have seen the possession of *stockpiles* of WMD as the central issue. He was, as so much of his writing makes clear, always mindful of how rapidly things can change and how quickly civilian programs—to say nothing of unilaterally abandoned military ones—can be activated for military purposes.)

Neither will we enjoy the benefit of Albert's critique of the Iran NIE. I imagine it would zero in on the apparent inconsistency of Iran's sustained, costly, and challenging ballistic missile development with the regime's claim not to have a nuclear weapons program. I know he would be wary in the extreme of the idea that the way to deal with a future Iranian nuclear weapon is to sign an agreement in which the regime in Teheran promises to restrict itself to only "peaceful" uses of nuclear materials.

If we were to think as Albert would about the issues flowing from Iran's current position with respect to nuclear power (they insist on it) and nuclear weapons ("we don't want and have no program to get them"), we would do well to study his important discussion of the multiple applications of a single technology or the multiple technologies instrumental in the achievement of a single purpose. Albert believed that both phenomena rendered arms control dangerously ineffective in all but a few very special cases.

In the case of the Iran NIE, and in other intelligence products not yet even conceived, we should resolve to apply the Wohlstetter four-word test: "But is it true?"

Albert's disdain for arms control theory reflected his concern that ineffective agreements would substitute for hard thinking and hard choices about how to protect the nation in the era of the "delicate balance of terror." That was the title he gave to a brilliant, widely discussed article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1959 that introduced the broad public to the key concepts of strategy in the nuclear age, many of which were conceived and articulated during the course of his highly classified research at the RAND Corporation. He was especially emphatic in later years that careless thinking about arms control could drive strategic policy even further in the direction of accepting "mutual assured destruction" (MAD) as the key to American security.

Much of Albert's critique of arms control refers to what he calls "MAD-based arms control" because its main objectives were premised on the idea that (a) stable nuclear deterrence was easy to achieve; (b) the way to achieve it was to build only a minimum deterrent force that could confidently destroy Soviet (or, for the Soviets, American) cities in a massive retaliatory attack; and (c) since both the United States and the Soviet Union accepted (a) and (b), agreements in which each pledged not to acquire capabilities beyond those defined in (b) could, and should, be negotiated. But when one examined the arguments for the arms control agreements beginning with the (subsequently violated) moratorium on nuclear testing and continuing through the ABM Treaty and the SALT and START treaties, they invariably presupposed the desirability of a strategic balance based on the threat to destroy cities.

So, at the core of Albert's disparagement of arms control is his view that the underlying rationale for treaties limiting the numbers, types, and technologies of strategic forces served only to reinforce MAD doctrine, a doctrine he deplored on both prudential and moral grounds. After all, the idea that it was desirable to reduce our strategic arsenal to the lowest number of weapons required for massive retaliatory attacks against Soviet cities meant that if deterrence failed, we might someday be forced to choose between doing nothing or killing millions of innocent civilians. Throughout his life and writings, Albert argued the moral obtuseness of the physicists, clergymen, politicians, and intellectuals who so readily embraced MAD. (Once, observing a group of women marching in an antimissile defense demonstration in Washington, DC, Albert remarked: "They must call themselves 'mothers for offensive forces only'.")

Responding to Henry Kissinger's rhetorical question, "What in God's name is superiority at these levels?", Albert comments:

I am all for probing the premises of thought on arms and arms-control which the Secretary is said to want. But that can only start when we face up to evasions making "murder respectable" in such chaste phrases as "counter-value attacks" and in all the unreflective vocabulary of the arms race. This is an important part of rethinking policy about our relations with allies and adversaries, long overdue and essential for reducing the present chaos.

Albert's deep skepticism about the utility of arms control agreements did not lead him to oppose them in principle, although he was frequently described as among a group of analysts who were "opposed to arms control." While many of the arms control enthusiasts Albert assessed never met an agreement they didn't like, it could not be said that Albert opposed all agreements. To be sure, he set a much higher standard than the arms control professionals—negotiators, analysts, politicians, and professors—by insisting that only certain types of agreement were worth having. The criteria he set out are as relevant today as when he argued for them over a long career—and they tend to be ignored by diplomatic professionals who frequently lose sight of an agreement's purpose in their zeal to get an agreement for agreement's sake.

The idea that arms control agreements should have limited purposes and should be of limited duration reflected Albert's view that "comprehensive" agreements were bound to invite evasion through the exploitation of loopholes or, worse, out-and-out violations. He opposed permanent agreements because he knew that the considerations underlying any agreement would change in unpredictable ways: today's technological *cul de sac* would become tomorrow's super highway.

He knew that, once in place, arms control agreements were nearly impossible to vacate, even if they had clear termination clauses (indeed, even when they had expiration dates). And he knew that agreements were not self-enforcing. He scoffed at the claims of arms controllers that "if the other side violates the agreement, we will withdraw from it immediately." He had seen too many instances in which it was difficult or impossible to

prove that a violation of a vaguely worded provision had taken place, or in which a questionable interest in keeping a violated agreement trumped even a legal exit, or in which the hope that yet another agreement could be reached led governments to turn a blind eye to the violations of the agreements already in place. He summarized his view of an agreement worth having this way:

For this reason, one should reject the argument made by many proponents of arms control today that a treaty of permanent duration will confer stability, because it will enable us and our adversaries to plan with certainty. On the contrary, it is a sure recipe for instability because in general we cannot anticipate such further changes long enough in advance, and a permanent treaty would prevent us from making incremental adjustments when it becomes clear that they are about to occur. We should look for an agreement which is not only monitorable, but one which we can enforce unilaterally, and one that provides strong incentives for us to enforce compliance. In fact, we want the incentives for our enforcing the agreement to exceed the incentives for looking the other way.

Disappointment with the use of military power in Iraq has led to another of what have become recurrent surges in the idea that “diplomacy” can achieve what the force of arms cannot, and that agreements with adversaries are the highest expression of diplomacy. Thus we are deeply engaged in negotiations with Iran and North Korea in which Albert’s high standard defining a good agreement will almost certainly not be met. And the search is on for other partners, venues, and contexts in which to negotiate the cooperation of other states in solving the problems we face.

How will we approach an end to the uranium enrichment demands of the Iranians? How will we define the prohibited activities of the North Koreans under an agreement to cause them to abandon their nuclear weapons program? How should we respond to Putin’s rants about ballistic missile defense or his threats to abandon arms control agreements reached during the Soviet period? Can the limitation of greenhouse gases be limited most effectively by constraints on the consumption of fossil fuels or by technological innovation?

Albert would certainly not approve relying solely, or even significantly, on arms control agreements with the Iranians or

the North Koreans as a means of halting their nuclear programs. And, having never been enthusiastic about the ABM Treaty or the agreements limiting conventional forces, I suspect he would treat Putin's threats and posturing with benign neglect. As for global warming, Albert would place a large bet on technology. He would look at the numbers, the costs of limiting consumption, the likelihood that our restraint would be vitiated by the behavior of others, the tradeoffs between limiting economic growth and investing in technology, and he would look beyond current thinking for new solutions. And he would be right.

ENDNOTES - Perle

1. Albert Wohlstetter, "On Disconfirmability: A Karl Popper Sort of Observation on the Troubles with 'Verification'," unpublished, revised December 20, 1984, p. 1, available from the Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter Papers, Notes, Box 102 Folder 5.