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THE SOVIET-AMERICAN ARMS RACE: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

*J. David Singer**

THE GAME OF DISARMAMENT: HOW THE U.S. & RUSSIA RUN THE ARMS RACE. By *Alva Myrdal*. New York: Pantheon. 1976. Pp. 448. Cloth, \$15.00; paper, \$5.95.

In this essay on Alva Myrdal's provocative analysis of post-World War II "disarmament" negotiations, I would like to develop three major theses. First, that arms reduction is the number one problem facing the world community in the relevant future. Second, that a highly complex and symbiotic relationship between and within the Soviet and American societies has stood in the way of any solution for the past three decades. And, third, such a solution is dependent on a combination of intellectual discipline and political courage of a kind that remains in short supply. While these three assertions are all stimulated by *The Game of Disarmament*, and the author would no doubt agree with each of them in principle, it is fair to expect some interesting and perhaps important divergences in detail. In any event, let me arrange my review around these theses in the order suggested.

THE PRIMACY OF DISARMAMENT

While it is embarrassing to admit, a great many social scientists (not to mention practitioners) have taken the position that the reduction or elimination of national armaments is not a problem to be addressed directly, but is rather symptomatic of a more fundamental problem, and will thus be solved only when the underlying one is solved. The first difficulty with this diagnosis is disagreement as to the identity of the underlying problem.

Among the traditional political scientists, historians, and lawyers who have studied and/or practiced in the international security field during this century, excess defense spending is often seen as symptomatic of incompatible interests, inter-nation tension, and the concomitant sense of military insecurity. That is, nations arm largely when there is an objective threat to their territorial security and other vital interests; they maintain and

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raise their levels of armament in response to the continuation or escalation of the threat. From this, it follows that national governments will slow down and reverse their preparedness programs when the threat diminishes and tensions are reduced. And the corollary, of course, is that they will not, and dare not, make such a decision *until* the threat has been reduced or eliminated.

Even the most casual observer of international politics will think of those arms races—including most dramatically that involving the USSR and the US over the past three decades—in which each side's putatively defensive preparations constitute the threat that generates the other side's need to pile up even greater levels of hardware. To develop this point a bit further, there is the familiar "ratchet effect" noted by Russett and others: as more resources go to certain groups and sectors of a society, these groups become more powerful. And that power is, almost inevitably, used to claim more of the same, with the result that the pro-armament forces gradually become stronger domestically, and their opponents become weaker. Of course, this occurs not only in terms of material and political strength, but also in symbolic and psychological terms.

All too often, it takes some economic or political, or military trauma to break this vicious cycle. Yet the conventional wisdom would have us believe that the threat can be reduced or eliminated via diplomatic negotiation, and that political elites will then respond with major reductions in military preparedness. We are, it seems, asked to believe that those who benefit materially and psychically from high levels of military preparedness will work energetically and imaginatively for arrangements that will reduce or eliminate those benefits.

I will return to Myrdal's treatment of the arms-tension dilemma in a moment, but before doing so let us examine a second version of the notion that weapons are merely symptomatic of some deeper problem, which, when solved, will lead readily to disarmament. This is the equally naive proposition that have-not nations arm for war in order to redress economic grievances, and that if the wealthier nations would make markets and resources and capital and technology available to them, they could reduce poverty and deprivation in their countries and would thus no longer have the incentive to militarize. From this, it follows that arms races and wars could be eliminated via massive economic aid and wide-scale social reform. Like the political-settlement-first scenario, the prosperity-first scenario has some serious flaws. One of them is that while the poorer nations have about the same

frequency of *civil* wars as do the industrially advanced ones, they experience a much lower frequency of arms races and international wars than do the richer nations. In a number of analyses by the Correlates of War Project at Michigan, we have found a very strong historical association between wealth and war proneness, suggesting that it is not poverty or exploitation that leads to exacerbated international conflict. Thus, the elimination of these social ills is well worth addressing on other grounds, but as a solution to the arms race and/or war problem, it is probably irrelevant.

Equally important to the primacy argument is the other side of the coin: the poor prospects for economic development as long as the nations continue to pour their resources into military preparedness. It is not only the problem of material resources that might otherwise go to more socially essential sectors, but also the psychological mobilization that normally accompanies financial and material mobilization. In order to justify military expenditures, governments need to describe the adversary of the moment in menacing terms and appeal in general to the chauvinistic tendencies that are inculcated in every population from childhood to the grave. An important, if indirect, result of all this propaganda and socialization is the public's ability not only to view other peoples with a mix of superiority and fear, but also with an amazing indifference. Be it the Jews in Nazi Germany or the Vietnamese boat people or the Indian villagers starving to death, most of us can turn our backs all too comfortably. And if we are not moved to action by such immediate and human crises, how likely are we to respond to appeals for economic sacrifice on behalf of long-range development for a vague melange of poor people of different color, half a world away? To the extent that nations are mobilized, materially and psychologically, for war (and, of course, deterrence!), the likelihood of closing the rich-poor gap is that much reduced.

Thus, both the author of *The Game of Disarmament* and this reviewer concur on the primacy of disarmament in both senses of the word. First, that neither political settlement nor significant economic development can be expected without a major reversal in military preparedness and arms expenditure. And, second, the corollary that such progress in arms reduction cannot be postponed while we wait for either political settlements or the eradication of global poverty.

THE SOVIET-AMERICAN MATRIX

These conclusions—or premises, if the argument seems less than compelling—lead to my second major theme, as well as to the most controversial parts of *The Game of Disarmament*. This is that the general problem of direct arms reduction, in the absence of major tension reduction via political settlement or economic development, is further complicated in the specific case of the Soviet Union and the United States.

A number of reviewers have already focussed on Myrdal's interpretation of the superpowers' behavior and interaction as fundamentally flawed. Thus, let me try to summarize her position and then offer an interpretation that is only slightly different. As her title suggests, and as she asserts in a straightforward manner, the USSR and the USA (with the acquiescence, if not collusion, of their respective European allies) have been and still are engaged in a complex and continuing game of deception and duplicity. In her view, their decision makers and negotiators go through the motions of serious bargaining in the alleged pursuit of the agreements to slow down, cap, and reverse the arms race. But she concludes that there is no realistic commitment to those objectives, and that both the negotiation process and the occasional agreements on arms *control* serve as smokescreens, behind which each government is free to develop, test, produce, deploy, and even export, weapons of ever-increasing sophistication and/or lethality. What perhaps antagonizes her Western critics most of all (I have not yet seen any Soviet reviews) is her willingness to lay as much of the blame at the American doorstep as she does at the Soviet doorstep. Not only does Myrdal see Washington and Moscow as equally culpable, but she then makes it clear that one can hardly expect any better from the USSR, whereas the United States *should* (and could) set a more wholesome and constructive example.

As I see it, her critics and all those observers everywhere who try to allocate the blame for failure in arms reduction are all missing the point. Virtually all governments, and especially those of major powers, operate under severe constraints. First of all, there is no regime on the face of the earth that is not in the game of interest aggregation. No matter how culturally uniform a nation may be, nor how equal its distribution of wealth, there will be conflicting interests. The "national interest" is a convenient fiction for the political elite, but it inevitably turns out to be essentially identical to the parochial interests of those groups,

strata, and regions that constitute the governing coalition. Even *within* the governing coalition, the convergence of foreign policy/national security interests is far from high; rather, we typically find that these dominant groups have (or more precisely, perceive that they have) some interests that are identical, some that are different but compatible, and some that need to be reconciled. And the major role of political parties and governments is to put together coalitions of interest groups in such a way as to achieve and then maintain power to govern.

If this interpretation of domestic politics is correct, it follows that a good deal of wheedling, cajoling, concealing, and manipulating is likely to be involved, meaning that a rational calculation of national interests will be rare indeed. While Myrdal does not explicitly embrace this interest aggregation model of the policy process, at least in the foreign policy sector, she comes fairly close to it in her discussion of strategic parity. As she points out, the limited stability of the nuclear stand-off does *not* require that the Soviet and American forces have roughly the same quantities in each of the major weapon categories. Rather, such stability (and she well recognizes how fragile it is) requires only that each have the capacity to: (a) ride out a first strike nuclear attack by the other; and (b) nevertheless be able to retaliate with sufficient force to produce damage levels that would be unacceptable to those contemplating the first strike. A central implication of this is that, in terms of strategic nuclear forces, preponderance is not only not necessary to the deterrent; rather it seriously vitiates the deterrent by appearing provocative, suggesting a possible first strike. Further, even strategic *parity* is not necessary, given: (a) the need for only a small remaining force to threaten unacceptable retaliatory damage; and (b) the virtual impossibility under current and projected technology of destroying most of the victim's retaliatory force via a first strike. What *is* needed, then, is a small but highly survivable second strike capability.

Moreover, most strategic analysts in and around Washington and Moscow understand this technological virtue quite well. Why, then, do they call for or accept the drive for either superiority or parity (and these preferences shift from time to time and bureau to bureau in both nations) when they appreciate that superiority could be destabilizing and that a marked quantitative *inferiority* would suffice? Partly, of course, the preoccupation with superiority reflects certain deviations from a straight nuclear deterrence doctrine. Some strategists want to acquire more than a deter-the-war capability, and actively seek a win-the-war arse-

nal. Others pursue a so-called damage-limiting capability, so that a "retaliatory" blow could be launched on the basis of a warning alone, thus destroying some or much of the enemy's forces before they were launched on their first strike mission. Still others see a nuclear-missile preponderance as a political and diplomatic instrument by which to intimidate the adversary in times of crisis or of intermittent war; one needs superiority to prevail, and—at the minimum—parity to avoid being intimidated.

While all of these considerations have a modicum of merit to them, it is improbable that a rational, competent, and patriotic official would find any or all of them sufficient to justify the pursuit of strategic superiority. The direct and indirect economic costs are staggering, the diplomatic efficacy is dubious, and the strategic consequence is too provocative; further, it drives the adversary to follow suit, with each side less secure than before. What, then, is the explanation? Again, Myrdal does not put it quite this way, but she would probably agree that the key factor is that mentioned above: the need for any political elite to put together a dominant coalition, without which it is impossible to govern in either the domestic or foreign sectors. Since the anti-military factions in the superpowers have slowly dwindled in number and strength vis-à-vis those diverse groupings that see themselves (or their nation) as generally benefiting in the short run from continued or increased military expenditures, the political predisposition is there. Then there are the psychic fears: (a) the nationalistic fear of the enemies of the moment; and (b) the personalistic fear of scoring low in political virility.

When these sets of factors all combine with the sad fact that neither scholars nor practitioners know very much about international security problems, the role of rationality declines even further. That is, the type of systematic, scientific research that might help us predict the likely consequences of this or that policy move is still considered unnecessary and/or impossible by the policy elites of most nations, and as a result, little of it gets done. Thus, decision makers as well as their critics have little to go on but the common sense and conventional wisdom of the time and place; and given how frequently this folklore changes and how frequently it has led to disaster, we might well be surprised that it commands widespread assent and support in politically relevant circles. To the contrary, each grouping and faction can interpret the line in the most convenient way and those who differ with it can usually bargain for some modification in a proposed policy.

Aphoristically, one might say that the less solid the evidence in support of a given policy decision, the greater will be the potency of extra-rational parochial considerations to corrupt rational problem-solving.

A final aspect of this superpower symbiosis is that it occurs not only within, but between, the United States and USSR. As suggested above, a major consideration in the formulation of national security policy, along with estimates of the adversary's hostile intentions, are estimates of his current and projected capacity to carry out such intentions. Thus, increases in the number or quality of a given weapon system on one side serve as a justification and stimulus for further preparedness on the other side. Be it tanks, aircraft, warheads, a new missile, the observed or hypothesized or alleged advantage of the adversary—even the “mineshaft gap” as Representative Aspin calls the argument in favor of more fallout shelters—any such real or imagined inadequacy can often justify yet another addition to the nation's arsenal. To reiterate, governments normally maintain *some* level of preparedness, and it takes very little external stimulus to jack that level up a bit; and with each increase, if accompanied by the appropriate political, economic, and propaganda gestures, the adversary's political elites have additional incentive to jack their own levels up a bit. This is how arms races usually begin, and once underway, the forces in favor tend to get stronger at the expense of those who might resist the pressures for further escalation. In sum, the combination of external threat, internal predisposition, limited knowledge, and short-run perspectives all combine to produce, all too frequently, the acquisition of military forces that are more injurious than helpful to the security of the nation. In the next section, let us examine some of Myrdal's ideas as to how we might break out of this historically recurrent and often destructive self-amplifying process.

SOME POSSIBLE STRATEGIES

If, as suggested in the previous section, it is a relatively simple matter for two nations with some incompatible security interests to get into and then prolong a costly and dangerous arms race, is it just as easy to slow it down and get out of it? While Myrdal could hardly be accused of thinking the problem of extrication a simple one, she is at least willing to go the extra mile and take some important risks in the enterprise. Perhaps the biggest risk for those of us involved in the international security field is

a psychological and professional one: the risk of appearing "soft" on the putative enemy, or of appearing "naive" enough to believe that analyses must be offered and solutions considered and proffered in a problem area that has suffered from an abundance of "hardness" and "realism."

One of the most common weaknesses amongst practitioners and analysts on all sides (and especially manifest in the Western reviews of *The Game of Disarmament*) is the reluctance to go that extra mile. All too many of us have been willing for all too long to come up with a solution that seems fair and reasonable to ourselves, and merely hope that the other side will find it acceptable. When they do not (almost always), we shrug our shoulders in a mix of resignation and self-righteousness, and announce that it is now up to them. The trouble is that "it" is the slim chance for creating a habitable world community, but from the post-war Acheson-Lilienthal proposals to the Soviet insistence on arms reduction *prior* to inspection, neither set of elites has shown the courage and creativity and determination that the dilemma demands.

Leaving history aside for the moment, what are the suggested directions found in Myrdal's agenda for disarmament? In this part of her book, she addresses the following problems: (a) the rising production and dissemination of conventional weapons; (b) the continued testing of nuclear weapons; (c) the continuing production and rising proliferation of nuclear weapons; (d) the continuing production of chemical and biological weapons. At the risk of oversimplifying, let me outline her approach to them.

Recognizing that all arms reduction decisions of a government will be affected by its strategic doctrine, she begins with the proposal that the nuclear powers first negotiate the basic size and type of their minimum strategic deterrent. That is, they would retain a nuclear weapons inventory until well into the conventional and exotic weapons disarmament stage, but at a level that could hardly serve for any purpose other than a retaliatory strike against industrial and population centers. She urges that the quantity and development pattern of each component of this minimal deterrent be negotiated—on the basis of careful statistical analyses, simulation studies, etc.—as soon as possible. Once the "nuclear shield" levels had been settled, "the methods and the pace" of arriving at the agreed configurations at the agreed date could be worked out.

Among the critical components of the nuclear-arms reduction process would be: (a) no more field tests of warheads; (b) no

more field tests of delivery vehicles; (c) as severe a restriction on research and development as could be negotiated and enforced; (d) the establishment of additional nuclear-free zones; and (e) a ban on the export of the weapons or their components. This reviewer fully agrees not only with Myrdal's emphasis on the need for all nuclear powers to accept and move quickly toward a bare-boned minimum deterrent, but also with the general lines of her approach to that objective. Moreover, once we have lived with these low-level second-strike forces only, along with the institutional mechanisms that would necessarily accompany this phased reduction and production cut-off period, we might have a chance to move on to a more secure, but more ambitious, arrangement, in which all nuclear weapons have been gradually transferred to United Nations depots where they would be: (a) under close guard; (b) retrievable by governments, in extremis; and (c) gradually deteriorating into low reliability.

Space limitations preclude a more detailed treatment of these complex problems and the various options—often inconsistent, but always suggestive—laid out by Myrdal, but a brief word as to exotic weapons and conventional weapons is needed here. She reminds us that international legal conventions outlaw some of the more inhumane devices of destruction such as napalm, dum-dum bullets, and bacteriological, chemical, and radiological weapons, not to mention aerial bombing of "civilian" populations, but that their development, testing, deployment, and use has not been appreciably inhibited by legal obligations. Amongst these proposed solutions are more explicit and universal agreements to outlaw the use of these weapons in wartime, and to ban their testing, production, transportation, transfer, and deployment at all times. While there have been small steps in these directions, and some of the exotic weapons deteriorate rather rapidly, the net picture is far from promising. In addition, the development of binary weapons, whose individual components may be nontoxic until they are brought together on launching or prior to impact, will make production more tempting and inspection more difficult. But given the low probability of maintaining their monopoly, the serious problems of field use, and the complexities of defending against them, a strong case can be made for major power initiatives to cease further production and to destroy existing inventories. This would, I should hope, extend to the enhanced-radiation weapon (neutron bomb) now being developed.

Turning to conventional weapons, the problems and dangers are more familiar, but the obstacles considerably greater. For virtually every national government in the world, there are several major incentives to acquire and maintain relatively high levels of conventional preparedness. Deterrence and defense may often be paramount, but such other considerations as regime security and internal control, domestic coalition building, manipulation of the economy, political mobilization, and technological development, along with diplomatic leverage, all provide additional pressure for conventional weapons production or purchase. And, as with nuclear and exotic weapon systems, the observed, predicted, or rumored levels of the adversary's preparedness are by no means negligible.

After reminding us that very little international negotiating attention has gone to conventional arms reduction, Myrdal outlines a number of possible initiatives that the major powers—as the leading producers as well as exporters—might undertake. The first is full disclosure of all military expenditures by all nations, and as the records become more open, more standardized, and more reliable, the feasibility of agreed percentage cuts across the board might increase appreciably. Closely associated with disclosure of production would be disclosure of arms exports and imports. Central to this is her reminder that many of the exported weapons (napalm, fragmentation bombs, etc.) are already banned by international law and that the list should be expanded and its applicability reestablished.

Perhaps most critical, especially in the industrial nations that account for most of the world's production and export, is the role of economic conversion. Despite the fact that very little is known regarding both the effects of military spending and the likely effects of various rates of cutback in different sectors of diverse types of economy, there seems to be a growing consensus that: (a) sustained military expenditures inhibit economic growth and exercise an inflationary effect; and (b) the economic and social costs of conversion to nonmilitary production need not be high at all. But both sets of propositions require considerably more research, and conversion without some degree of planning could lead to serious unemployment and underutilization of plant and capital. Without the hard evidence that such research seems likely to generate, it will remain an easy matter for organized labor to coalesce with other interest groups in the industrial nations and help maintain or even expand the relative size of the military sector. I say this even though the work of SIPRI (the

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which Myrdal largely inspired) has already led to a marked advance in our knowledge of the arms-economy relationship.

In this connection, one of the more pervasive myths of today's world needs to be reexamined. That is, political elites often state that arms transfers give their nations greater influence on the domestic and foreign policies of the recipients, while denying or reducing the influence of their adversaries. I am not at all sure that this is true, even in the relatively short run, and, in the long run, it may even be a counterproductive instrument of foreign policy. Illustrative might be the decline of Soviet influence in Egypt and China, and that of the Americans in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Further, as these words are being written, we hear that Iran will cancel a seven-billion dollar arms import contract with the United States, suggesting not only the impermanence of such influence, but the negative consequences of its decline, politically and economically; the Bakhtiar government's announcement produced a sharp drop in the dollar's value on world money markets and a dramatic upsurge in the price of gold.

As an aside, one notes that the same governments that expend great energy and ingenuity to *eliminate* the drug trade will expend equal effort to *expand* their arms trade. To carry the analogy a step further, it is ironic that we relentlessly pursue the pusher who feeds his victim's *drug* addiction, but reward and encourage the pusher who feeds his victim's *arms* addiction. Perhaps the events in Iran, and those that are all too likely in Saudi Arabia, will help other developing nations to kick this arms import habit in time.

CONCLUSION

That I found Myrdal's book a gold mine of ideas, facts, and interpretations is evident from the nature of this essay. What began as a simple review turned into a lengthy discussion, stimulated by her lively imagination, broad knowledge, and vigorous style! Perhaps even more stimulating is the mix of courage and commitment that pervades this valuable study. Having worked in the vineyards of armament and disarmament for even more years than the author, and taken a good deal of verbal criticism for views similar to hers, it is comforting and encouraging to find the occasional kindred spirit. Thus, while I would quarrel with some of Myrdal's views, lament the occasional errors and inconsistencies, regret the absence of a more fully developed and inte-

grated political blueprint, and deplore the absence of a more tightly argued social science analysis, I can only applaud the appearance of this volume.

The post-World War II literature on international security policy has, from most sectors of most nations, been scandalously inadequate. The bulk of it has been not only unimaginative in concept and prescientific in method, but parochial in its diagnoses and timid in its prescriptions, overly "realistic" and painfully nationalistic. Another portion of this literature, coming largely from Western and Japanese scholars, has been shrill and naive, reflecting all too often that disdain for the hard facts of military affairs found in the Marxian or the pacifist efforts. A third and smaller sector has been quite technical, focussing either on the legal or the technological side of things, but tending to ignore the political and ethical dimensions. Finally, a very small, but growing body of work is scientific in the sense of seeking to identify historical regularities or put certain theoretical models to the empirical test. These studies have usually focussed on the dynamics of arms races, the military budget process, or the correlates of war, but not enough has been done so far to make their findings useful to the elites, or perhaps more importantly, the counter-elites. Against this rather disappointing record, Myrdal's book stands out as a major contribution. If humanity is fortunate, other specialists will pick up where this intrepid analyst leaves off, and in the meanwhile, governments and their critics will ponder and then act upon the basic themes that are so forcefully laid out in *The Game of Disarmament*.