

'Breakthrough' from Le Monde (29 May 1972)

Caption: On 28 and 29 May 1972, following the signing by the United States and the Soviet Union of the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems, the French daily newspaper Le Monde describes the current situation regarding the 'arms race' and lists the measures announced to limit nuclear weapons.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Fauvet, Jacques. 28-29.05.1972, n° 8.513; 29e année. paris: Le Monde. "La percée", p. 1.

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Breakthrough

Of all the agreements signed by Mr Nixon since his arrival in Moscow, those concluded on 26 May are by far the most important. For the first time in the history of the Cold War, and even in history in general, the two superpowers have reached agreement to limit not only arms yet to be manufactured or belonging to other countries, as has been the case so many times in the past, but the most terrifying components of their own arsenal — nuclear weapons. This is a breakthrough in a completely new area.

Finalised after some 30 months of negotiations and 127 sessions held alternately in Helsinki and Vienna, the Moscow accords establish a laboured but relatively flexible balance between the interests of the two parties. The limitation is most significant in regard to defensive weapons, since each side has undertaken to confine itself to two anti-missile missile sites and a maximum of 200 missiles. For the United States, which had initiated a programme to build five sites, this means that work already begun on the site at Malmstrom, Montana, will be halted. The Americans will still be able to install the new anti-missile weapons around Washington, and the Soviets on one of their offensive missile bases, but they will go no further — at least as long as this treaty, which has been concluded for an indefinite period, is not denounced by either of the signatories. Given that the race towards détente has been the most costly and the most destabilising in the long run, this result is very positive.

The provisions on offensive weapons will have less impact. In the first place, they are valid for only five years — scarcely long enough for a new generation of weapons to become operational. No distinction has been made between different types of delivery system, and bombers of all types have been omitted. Most important of all, only the number of launchers has been ‘frozen’, not the number of nuclear warheads. It is precisely because the Americans are currently installing multiple warheads on their rockets, and already possess more than twice as many nuclear charges as their rival, that they have agreed to remain content with fewer intercontinental missiles than the Soviets.

All this means, in effect, that the arms race will continue — both quantitatively, given the increasing number of warheads, and qualitatively, owing to technological progress in offensive and defensive systems. As if responding in advance to conservative critics in the American establishment, Mr Laird, the Secretary of Defence, has been quick to point out that the Pentagon will not cut its funding requests for offensive weapons in the next budget, and that the agreement concluded in Moscow in no way prevents the modernisation of existing equipment. For the United States, there is no question of giving up the B-1 super-bomber or the submarine for launching Trident long-distance missiles, two ambitious projects designed to renew the American arsenal in the 1980s.

The present agreement is only a beginning. Unless future SALT negotiations lead fairly quickly to a new, more comprehensive treaty on offensive weapons, it may even encourage rather than slow down the race for technological superiority. The USSR, which has pulled off a major political coup by obtaining numerical parity with its competitor for the first time, has not finished — as Stalin said with regard to capitalism — ‘catching up with and overtaking’ the United States.