Asian Studies Center

Backgrounder

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THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE'S PROMISE FOR ASIA

INTRODUCTION

Ronald Reagan's proposals for defenses against nuclear attack are perceived mainly as deterring Soviet attack against the U.S. and its European allies. Yet the Reagan Strategic Defense Initiative--or SDI--also could enhance deterrence greatly in Asia. SDI will include the development of defense systems against short-range Soviet missiles. These pose the dominant threat to Japan and other Asian nations. Even a point defense system protecting U.S. retaliatory missiles against incoming Soviet warheads would increase significantly the deterrent value of U.S. Pacific forces, reduce the threat of Soviet nuclear blackmail against U.S. Asian allies, and contribute to the overall security of the region.

Among its Asian partners, the U.S. has invited Japan, Australia, and South Korea to participate in SDI development. Japan already has signaled its inclination to participate, Australia has refused to make an official contribution, and South Korea is expected to participate eventually. These three nations possess the technical-industrial base necessary for SDI research. Japan, in particular, boasts civilian research facilities capable of contributing greatly to the advanced technologies necessary for SDI.

Tokyo and Canberra face substantial domestic political opposition to SDI participation. Pacifist sentiment in Japan always runs high, and the evolving U.S.-Japanese defense relationship continues to be hotly debated. In Australia, SDI is held hostage by the anti-nuclear and politically powerful Left, which also opposes the U.S.-Australian military alliance. Tokyo and Canberra, moreover, seem reluctant to

tamper with the venerable but fragile strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction, which relies on the specter of nuclear holocaust to deter nuclear attack. Seoul faces little domestic opposition to SDI. But for reasons yet unclear, South Korea has not seriously addressed the issue of participation. For its part, the People's Republic of China criticizes SDI publicly while conducting missile defense research on its own.

A major problem for SDI throughout Asia is that there has been little informed public debate on the issue. SDI tends to be overshadowed by traditional nuclear strategic issues dominated by the Left, such as nuclear disarmament and territorial access for U.S. nuclear weapons. Moscow, of course, is lobbying hard to prevent Asian participation in SDI.

As America's strategic, economic, and political focus continues its inexorable shift to Asia, it is appropriate that Washington strongly encourage Japan, Australia, and South Korea to participate in SDI. The U.S. should stress that participation at this stage entails only research and that participants will benefit enormously from the program's certain technological breakthroughs. To the public in these countries, the U.S. should emphasize the defensive nature of SDI and point out that its purpose is to reverse the nuclear arms race. Japan's participation is critical, and priority should be given to involve high-tech Japanese industries in initial SDI research.

SOVIET NUCLEAR THREAT TO ASIA

In recent years the Soviet Union steadily has increased its nuclear forces in Asia, where it now deploys 135 SS-20 intermediate-range missiles; SS-11 and SS-18 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) at seven major bases; 85 Backfire bombers; and 31 Y, D-I, D-II, and G-II class nuclear and conventionally powered ballistic missile submarines, representing 40 percent of Moscow's ballistic missile submarine inventory.[1]

Soviet nuclear capable cruise missiles in the Far East include SS-N-3/12s on Echo II class nuclear submarines and on two Kiev class aircraft carriers as well as SS-N-19s on the nuclear powered battle cruiser Frunze, just deployed to the Pacific.[2] The Soviet Far East commander has at his disposal several thousand nuclear missile

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1. "Government White Paper Backs Value of SDI for Deterrent Capabilities," Japan Times, August 8, 1985, p. 1; Department of Defense, Soviet Military Power, 1985, pp. 26, 33.

2. Ibid., p. 97; "Nuclear Powered Ships Join Pacific," Asahi Shimbun, September 29, 1985, p. 3.

warheads on long- and intermediate-range missiles. Their yield ranges from 150 kilotons on the SS-20 to 20 megatons on the giant SS-18.

This expansion in the Soviet arsenal has occurred mainly in the last decade. In 1975 the Pacific Fleet had only 11 ballistic missile submarines, intermediate-range missiles were of the earlier SS-4/5 type, and there were no Backfire bombers.

Soviet strategy calls for conventional forces to be supported by long- and short-range land and naval based nuclear weapons. Soviet wartime objectives in Asia no doubt call for attacks on U.S. forces and facilities in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia and on the high seas; the securing of the Soya Strait between Japan and Sakhalin Island; and the protection of Soviet ballistic missile submarines operating in the Sea of Japan, Sea of Okhotsk, and off the Kamchatka Peninsula.

The Soviets have used their nuclear muscle in Asia as political pressure on U.S. allies. After Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone said in 1983 that he would turn Japan into an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" against Soviet bombers and defend the Japanese Straits, Moscow warned: "In the present nuclear age there can be no 'unsinkable aircraft carrier.'" The Soviets then threatened Japan with "a national disaster" more serious than Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[3] But Nakasone has not been deterred. More than any other postwar Prime Minister, he has tried to shift Japanese attitudes to acceptance of a greater defense effort to meet the Soviet threat.

STRATEGIC DEFENSE FOR ASIA

In response to the growing Soviet nuclear threat and to enhance alliance solidarity, U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger in a March 27, 1985, letter invited Japan, Australia, and South Korea, in addition to the NATO allies and Israel, to participate in SDI research and development. The primary components of SDI research involve high-speed computers; advanced sensors; and non-nuclear kinetic energy, laser, particle beam, or ground-based missile weapons that could destroy intercontinental ballistic missiles and their nuclear warheads. U.S. officials have stressed, however, that SDI efforts

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3. "Tass Reacts to Nakasone Washington Post Remarks," in FBIS (Soviet Union), January 20, 1983, p. C1.

also will investigate systems for defense against short- and intermediate-range missiles--the main threat to Asia.[4]

Strategic defense systems would enhance U.S. and Asian security in a number of ways. Among them:

Protect Bases

Defense systems against Soviet short-range missiles could protect U.S. and allied military bases in Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines. Short-range ABM systems could provide protection against Soviet SS-20 intermediate-range missiles, but some protection against longer range land-based and sea-based ballistic missiles might also be possible. In densely populated areas such as Japan or South Korea, short-range anti-missile defense systems could protect population centers.

Enhance General Deterrence

Strategic defense systems will strengthen the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Asia. With its own territory defended from Soviet missiles, the U.S. increases the credibility of its pledge to use nuclear weapons, if necessary, to defend its allies.[5] This enhanced commitment could have important consequences in such trouble spots as the Korean peninsula. The Soviets, for example, would be less likely to support a North Korean attack against the South given the credible threat of a U.S. nuclear response. And in the case of missile defenses in the Philippines or Australia, the chances of a Soviet attack would be very slight--first, because they are so distant from the regions of critical concern to the Soviets, and second, because of the need for so many missiles to penetrate strategic defenses in the U.S. or Europe.

As important, if not more so, SDI would contribute to the deterrent value of existing U.S. and allied conventional forces. With their bases defended against Soviet missiles, allied air and naval units would be more likely to respond to Soviet conventional advances in Northeast, Southeast, or Southwest Asia.

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4. Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, Annual Report to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1986, p. 55; "U.S. Planning to Defend Japan From Soviet SS-20s," Japan Times, June 30, 1984, p. 1.

5. W. Bruce Weinrod and Manfred R. Hamm, "Strategic Defense and America's Allies," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 425, April 16, 1985, p. 6; "No, its a re-coupler," The Economist, September 26, 1985, p. 19.

ASIAN REACTION TO SDI

Japan

Japan's initial response to Weinberger's March 27 letter was that Tokyo would "carefully study" the proposal.[6] Japanese government spokesmen have since stressed SDI's defensive, non-nuclear intent. They have stated that Japan's participation in SDI would comply with the 1983 U.S.-Japanese military technology transfers agreement.[7] Many Japanese companies are eager to participate in SDI research, anticipating the potential for enormous technological spinoffs. But they must await a decision on the government's formal policy position.

The Japanese government has assumed a sympathetic attitude toward SDI despite the public's widespread pacifist and legal constraints on the use of Japan's armed forces. Last September, Prime Minister Nakasone had to bow to strong pressure from within his party not to raise defense spending above a politically sacrosanct 1 percent of GNP. Participation in SDI has been attacked as violating the 1969 Diet resolution calling for the peaceful use of outer space, the 1969 ban on the export of arms, and the 1971 resolution prohibiting the possession, manufacture, or introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan. In addition, strategic defense in general is criticized as a threat to the existing arms control regime based on offensive weapons and mutual assured destruction's balance of terror.

The Soviet Union has attempted to reinforce these perceptions by calling SDI an offensive weapon system and by raising the specter of Japanese militarization. Moscow threatens that Soviet-Japanese relations will "completely cool" if Japan joins the U.S. strategic defense effort.[8] This theme is echoed by the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), the country's second largest political party. During a recent visit of JSP leaders to Moscow, a communique was issued jointly with

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6. "Japan to Study U.S. Invitation To Participate in SDI Research," Japan Times, March 29, 1985, p. 1.

7. Tokyo, JIJI Press, "Abe Says No SDI R&D Involving Third Countries," April 8, 1985, in FBIS (Asia and Pacific), April 9, 1985, p. 3; Tokyo KYDO, "SDI Research Cooperation Termed Possible," April 8, 1985, in FBIS (Asia and Pacific), April 8, 1985, p. C1.

8. "Guzhenko Discourages Japanese SDI Participation," JIJI Press, in FBIS (Asia and Pacific), April 11, 1985, p. 3.

the Soviet Communist Party denouncing the U.S. for promoting "Star Wars" research and development.[9]

After meeting with President Reagan last January, Prime Minister Nakasone expressed his "understanding" of SDI. In February, the Prime Minister described SDI to the Diet as a defensive, non-nuclear system designed to reduce the number of nuclear weapons.[10] Following the May Industrial Powers Summit in Bonn, Nakasone said: "the abolition of nuclear weapons is at the center of SDI....This precious dream must be kept alive."[11]

Australia

To date, the Australian response to SDI participation has been negative. On several occasions since Weinberger's March 27 letter, Australian Foreign Minister Bill Hayden and Defense Minister Kim Beazley have opposed Australia's involvement in SDI, criticizing the program as a threat to arms control.[12]

Canberra's coolness toward SDI reflects the power of the anti-nuclear left wing of the ruling Labor Party. During the June 1984 Labor Party National Conference, the Left polled some 40 percent of delegate votes. The platform emerging from the Conference "condemned the research, testing, or deployment of anti-satellite or space-based anti-ballistic missile weapon systems by any nation."[13] Disarmament issues also played a key role in the 1984 national election.

The Left is highly critical of Prime Minister Robert Hawke for allowing port visits by nuclear powered and possibly nuclear armed U.S. Navy ships and for continuing to maintain three U.S.-Australian joint communication facilities in the country's interior. These

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9. "JSP, Soviet Communists Oppose Space Arms Race," Japan Times, September 21, 1985, p. 4.

10. John Burgess, "Nakasone Hints at Aiding 'Star Wars'," Washington Post, February 28, 1985, p. A28.

11. Tokyo NHK Television Network, "Nakasone Interview On Bonn Summit, Trade, SDI," May 14, 1985, in FBIS (Asia and Pacific), May 16, 1985, p. C3.

12. Melbourne Overseas Service, "Beazley Affirms Opposition To 'Star Wars'," June 12, 1985, in FBIS (Asia and Pacific), June 12, 1985, p. M1; Melbourne Overseas Service, "Hayden Reiterates Objection To 'Star Wars' Program," June 14, 1985, in FBIS (Asia and Pacific), September 3, 1985, p. M1; Foreign Minister Hayden, Speech to the United Nations, October 1, 1985.

13. Australian Labor Party Platform Constitution and Rules as approved by the 36th National Conference, Canberra 1984, pp. 94, 100.

facilities are used to relay information from U.S. reconnaissance satellites and for communicating with U.S. ballistic missile submarines.[14] And aware of the Labor Government's sensitivities, the U.S. has assured Australia that the joint communications facilities would not be used for SDI research.[15]

In response to stiff opposition from the Left, the Hawke government withdrew its financial support of research into rail-gun technology being conducted at Australia National University. Rail guns electronically propel projectiles at high speed and are one of the systems being investigated by the U.S., but the Australian project was not connected to the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative.

The more conservative opposition Liberal Party calls the Labor Party's opposition to SDI "irresponsible."[16] The Liberals view SDI as a means of moving away from the "perpetual terror" of mutual assured destruction and of providing considerable technological benefit to Australian industry. Liberal Party support for SDI is expected to continue under the leadership of John Howard. In the last election, Liberal Party members won 42 percent of the seats in Parliament.

Republic of Korea

To date, there has been no official or private comment from Seoul on Weinberger's March 27 letter. Since nuclear weapons are deployed on the Korean peninsula and there is little organized anti-nuclear sentiment in the ROK, Seoul's eventual response to SDI participation is expected to be favorable.

People's Republic of China

The PRC has an active military and commercial space research program. It currently has deployed about 6 long-range ballistic missiles, 60 intermediate-range ballistic missiles, and possibly two ballistic missile submarines. Chinese say privately that they would like to participate eventually in the nuclear arms control process, but only after they had increased their own nuclear missile inventory to the level needed for assured deterrence.

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14. Dr. Andrew Mack, "U.S. Bases In Australia--The Controversy Grows," Asian Defense Journal, November 1984, p. 49; Geraldine Brooks, "Many Australians Worry That U.S. Bases Put Nation In Jeopardy as Nuclear Target," Wall Street Journal, August 22, 1985, p. C1.

15. Nayan Chanda, "Sympathy for Hawke," Far Eastern Economic Review, February 21, 1985, p. 15.

16. Melbourne Overseas Service, "Opposition Criticizes Government Decision on SDI," June 14, 1985, in FBIS (Asia and Pacific), June 18, 1985, p. M1.

The PRC is critical of both Soviet and U.S. efforts to militarize outer space. However, it has criticized publicly only the U.S. strategic defense research program. Recently, top Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping said the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative "...would cause a critical change in the arms race."[17] In the PRC's view, SDI will destabilize the current nuclear balance and start a new arms race because the Soviets will increase their offensive weapons or develop new SDI technologies.

Meanwhile, the PRC is conducting extensive research in laser technology, particularly in association with its nuclear energy program.[18] Chinese military officers admit that the PRC is conducting research on ways to defeat nuclear weapons. Presumably, these efforts include strategic defense measures. Last June, a U.S. government delegation visited Beijing to explain SDI to the PRC, and Chinese delegations frequently raise the issue in talks in Washington.

CONCLUSION

The continued growth of Soviet nuclear might in Asia poses a serious military and political threat to the U.S. and its Asian allies. In response, the U.S., through the Strategic Defense Initiative, seeks to explore the feasibility of shifting from a strategy based on mutual assured destruction to a possible defense against nuclear annihilation. U.S. allies in Asia could contribute greatly to this effort and to the overall security of the Free World alliance.

To win support for strategic defense in Asia, the U.S must better explain the merits of the concept to the public. Debate in Japan and Australia suffers from misunderstanding and disinformation. The U.S. therefore should answer SDI critics by stressing that:

1) the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent will increase if the U.S. and its Asian allies are defended against nuclear attack;

2) strategic defenses eventually may render offensive nuclear weapons obsolete;

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17. "'Star Wars Must Be Avoided--Deng," Beijing Review, August 12, 1985, p. 6.

18. Bradley Hahn, "China's Nuclear History," The China Business Review, July-August 1985, p. 31.

3) weapons that may emerge from SDI are defensive and non-nuclear, destroying missiles not people;

4) the Soviet Union's strategic defense efforts far exceed those of the U.S.;

5) Asian economies will benefit enormously from technologies derived from SDI research.

As noted last year by the U.S. Defense Science Board Task Force, Japanese technology in many fields is equal and, in some cases, superior to that of the U.S.[19] Japanese participation in SDI will depend largely on the progress in general defense technology cooperation. In early 1983 Nakasone announced the U.S. would be exempted from the 1967 arms export ban, and a framework for implementing defense technology transfers to the U.S. was concluded in November 1983. To date no Japanese defense technology has reached the U.S.

The U.S. should encourage American companies to develop ties with their Japanese counterparts pursuing defense research, particularly in dual-use areas such as fiber optics, sensors, and computers.[20] In contrast to that of the U.S., most Japanese research on technology with defense applications takes place in the private sector. Washington could facilitate this process through U.S.-Japanese joint military technology ventures in private industry. The U.S. also could translate more Japanese technical publications into English to allow U.S. companies to keep abreast of Japanese progress. Finally, the U.S. and Japan should expand significantly the existing programs for the exchange of scientists and other high-tech specialists.

Encouraging Japan's participation in SDI should be a high U.S. priority. Japanese participation would enhance the shared benefits of U.S.-Japan defense cooperation and signal that Japan intends to contribute its full share to Free World defense.

Richard D. Fisher, Jr.
Policy Analyst

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19. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, Report of Defense Science Board Task Force on Industry-to-Industry International Armaments Cooperation Phase II-Japan, June 1984, p. 67.

20. Ibid., p. 65.