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STRATEGIC DEFENSE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ARMS NEGOTIATIONS

INTRODUCTION¹

A frequently raised concern about the Reagan Administration's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is that it would impede the "arms control process" and make future U.S.-Soviet arms control agreements less likely. "One of the casualties (of strategic defense) could be arms control," stated former U.S. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft.² And on Capitol Hill, Senator John Kerry has said flatly that "you cannot have SDI and arms control at the same time."³ Soviet ruler Mikhail Gorbachev warns that "if an arms race in space is not prevented, nothing else will work."⁴

Yet, there is no inherent incompatibility between the development or deployment of defenses against nuclear attack and progress in achieving arms control objectives. Such defenses in fact may help move the world closer to these objectives than have recent arms negotiations and treaties.

Strategic defenses could address the principal goals of arms control--strengthening deterrence, protecting retaliatory forces and limiting damage in a superpower nuclear conflict or from a nuclear

1. This is the fourteenth in a series of Heritage Backgrounders on Strategic Defense. A complete list appears at the end of this study.

2. Michael R. Gordon, "Who's the Real Reagan Behind U.S. Soviet Policy?," National Journal, September 15, 1984, p. 1713.

3. The Washington Post, June 5, 1985, p. A30.

4. "An Interview with Gorbachev," Time Magazine, September 9, 1985, p. 27.

attack launched accidentally or by a smaller nation. At the same time, defenses offer the long-term possibility of moving to a new era where the prospect of total societal destruction from nuclear weapons could be eliminated.

Moscow seeks to place the U.S. on the political defensive by branding strategic defense as the "militarization of space." It also has offered "concessions" in the reduction of offensive strategic systems in return for a ban on strategic defenses. Any serious Soviet offer of substantial offensive reductions of course should be studied. But the U.S. response should be to build on such suggestions as steps toward a transition to a strategic balance dominated by defensive systems rather than offensive.

The Reagan Administration should explain to Moscow the potentially positive, useful relationship between strategic defense and arms control objectives. The Administration should develop and offer a series of conceptual proposals that reflect these possibilities and to which Moscow would have to respond. Given U.S. technological capabilities and the Kremlin's own longstanding interest in strategic defense, there is a real chance that Moscow eventually may agree to a transition to a negotiated strategic balance based on defense.

ARMS CONTROL OBJECTIVES

Two key objectives of nuclear arms control theory are: 1) the maintenance of strategic stability to avoid nuclear conflict, and 2) the limiting of damage should a nuclear conflict occur.

In the mid-1960s, Soviet Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) development made a U.S. homeland defense problematical. As such, official U.S. arms control theory posited that the best way to assure strategic stability was for both superpowers to be vulnerable to nuclear attack or retaliation from the other side. Neither side would dare attack, according to the theory known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), because it knew that it would in turn be devastated by a retaliatory strike. Implicitly, damage limitation was dropped as a major arms control objective.

These ideas served as the theoretical underpinning for the major arms agreements of the 1970s, SALT I and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The ABM treaty was supposed to prevent either nation from meaningfully defending itself against the other. At the same time, loosely defined temporary limits on offensive nuclear weapons were adopted in SALT I. Many treaty advocates assumed that the Kremlin shared the underlying MAD theory of mutual vulnerability. Since the U.S. was leaving itself unprotected, it was insisted, Moscow would feel no need to continue to increase its strategic offensive forces.

By the late 1970s, even prior to SDI, it was apparent that arms control efforts were not achieving their professed objectives. Strategic stability, particularly in a crisis situation, was rapidly being undermined by the Soviet buildup of heavy land-based ICBMs which could destroy much of the U.S. retaliatory capability in a preemptive attack. Moscow was also devoting considerable resources to research and development of defensive systems potentially capable of blocking much of what remained of U.S. retaliatory capability after a Soviet attack, as well as to developing a civil defense system to protect the Soviet elite.

In sum, the "arms control process" of the 1970s had not achieved the original sound objectives of arms control theory. Soviet behavior, along with the complexities brought by new technologies, made the prospects for traditional arms control dim.

ARMS CONTROL AND SDI: GENERAL ISSUES

By the latter part of the Carter Administration, a number of theorists were examining alternative approaches to U.S. nuclear strategy. Many concluded that in view of technological advances a reconsideration of the role of defenses in U.S. policy was appropriate.

Influenced by this thinking, Ronald Reagan announced his Strategic Defense Initiative on March 23, 1983. A debate has arisen over the implications of SDI for the future of arms control. There are strong reasons to believe that SDI can decrease the threat of nuclear conflict. Among them:

SDI As Incentive

Critics contend that the U.S. should abandon SDI, perhaps even unilaterally, because Moscow so far rejects any discussions on this subject and has indicated that U.S. pursuit of it could end hopes for any new arms treaty. This approach takes "negotiability"--whether Moscow is willing to discuss an issue--rather than U.S. interests and strategic stability as the principal determinants of the U.S. position.

It also takes Soviet posturing at face value, and ignores four relevant points:

- 1) Moscow has demonstrated repeatedly that it will do what it perceives to be in its interest regardless of earlier rhetoric, or even commitments;

2) The Soviets walked out of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) and Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) arms talks, but eventually returned even though NATO explicitly rejected its preconditions for resuming the talks. This probably will be repeated should Moscow walk out of arms talks because of SDI;

3) Even many SDI critics acknowledge that SDI was a major reason why the USSR returned to the bargaining table. The Soviets are concerned enough about SDI to perhaps eventually negotiate seriously;

4) As Carter National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued, Moscow is more likely to bargain seriously if the U.S. moves toward actual deployments rather than mere research.

Soviet Views of Defense

Moscow's ultimate position on strategic defense, and therefore on the possibility of integrating defense into an arms control agreement, may well be somewhat different, and more flexible, than current Soviet rhetoric might suggest. This is true for several reasons:

First, Soviet practice has always been to allocate substantial resources for strategic defense activities. Moscow until recently devoted about four times more than the U.S. to such programs, and has spent more on overall defensive than on offensive capabilities since the 1972 ABM pact. The USSR already possesses many key elements of a defensive system and is working intensely on those remaining.

Second, the logic of deploying defenses should be compelling to a society whose civilian population was scarred by massive enemy destruction in both world wars, and to a leadership clique which values its own survival above all else.

Third, Soviet officials used to speak sympathetically of defenses. In 1962, for example, in a United Nations arms control proposal, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko suggested that Moscow would accept limited defenses against ICBMs. In 1965, Soviet General Nikolai Talensky wrote that "from the standpoint of strategy, powerful deterrent forces and an effective anti-missile system, when taken together, substantially increase the stability of mutual deterrence."⁵ Then in 1967, Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin commented that "Defensive systems which prevent attack are not the

5. Nikolai Talensky, "Anti-Missile Systems and Disarmament," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, February 1965, p. 28.

cause of the arms race, but constitute a factor preventing the death of people."⁶

Fourth, analyst Stephen Rosen has noted, the SALT I negotiating record reveals that Moscow believed that "ICBM defense was in principle a stabilizing factor that need not interfere with arms control...."⁷

Critics argue that, since the ultimate goal of SDI is to reduce the potential damage of nuclear weapons, why not just directly negotiate such reductions with the Soviets, thereby saving the vast sums to be spent on SDI?

This question assumes that it is possible to negotiate significant offensive arms reductions with the Soviets in the near term without SDI in development. That ignores the lessons of the SALT era and recent negotiations. Without the incentive of SDI or greatly increased U.S. offensive strategic forces, Moscow has refused resolutely to consider even discussing significant offensive reductions. The Soviet proposal offered in October 1985, under the pressure of the U.S. SDI program, still does not appear to address the principal U.S. concern--Soviet ICBM first strike capability. Moscow's experience has been that it has a good chance of obtaining what it seeks in arms talks merely by standing firm and allowing the U.S. to offer preemptive concessions.

Defense As Simplification

Skeptics argue that negotiating over defenses would complicate matters and cause even more delays in reaching an arms agreement. General Scowcroft suggests that "it has been difficult enough to negotiate simply strategic offensive weapons agreements. When you throw in defense, it obviously makes it immensely more complicated."⁸ But it is not obvious. Even negotiating another traditional arms agreement on the SALT model, explains former arms control negotiator John Rhinelander, would take "years of detailed,

6. "ABM Treaty May be Headed for Scrap Heap," Air Force Times, July 16, 1985, p. 26.

7. Stephen P. Rosen, "Safeguarding Deterrence," Foreign Policy, No. 35, Summer 1979, p. 119.

8. Robert Scheer, "Gen. Scowcroft Critical of 'Star Wars' Program," Los Angeles Times, February 8, 1985, p. 13.

hard bargaining...to produce an agreement in detail."⁹ It took seven years, for example, to reach agreement even on the flawed SALT II pact.

Further, when any issue becomes overly complex, it usually requires a breakthrough to a new conceptual paradigm to open a way out of that complexity. Strategic defense could be a conceptual breakthrough reshaping the traditional arms control agenda and providing a way for both sides to feel secure possessing substantially fewer nuclear weapons. Including strategic defenses in the negotiations could simplify matters and facilitate bargaining on the most important arms control problem for the U.S.--the threat to U.S. security generated by Soviet possession of an increasing number of first-strike-capable heavy land-based missiles--since U.S. defenses could by themselves help remove this threat.

Arms Control Prospects and Objectives

The pursuit of offensive reductions through the "arms control process" of the past decade and a half has not achieved its proclaimed objectives. Strategic stability has not been strengthened, the numbers of nuclear weapons have not been reduced, and the possible damage from a nuclear attack has not been diminished. Given this weak record, it is reasonable to begin exploring other possible methods, such as SDI, to protect U.S. security and achieve the objectives of arms control

Further, ongoing technological change makes the likelihood of meaningful arms control agreements involving only offensive strategic arms even less likely than in the past. As Brzezinski observes: "it is quite possible that arms control as we have known it has come to the end of the road...(because) it will become increasingly difficult to impose effective and verifiable limits (on newly developed systems).... The verification problem is becoming increasingly acute, given the mobility...and the opportunities for rapid reloading and recovery deployment."¹⁰ There are no signs of Soviet agreement to the kinds of intrusive on-site inspection that might make such an agreement involving either current, or especially future, nuclear delivery system technology satisfactorily verifiable.

9. Statement of John B. Rhinelander before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Security and Science, April 24, 1985, p. 26.

10. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "From Arms Control to Controlled Security," The Wall Street Journal, July 10, 1984.

SDI AND ARMS CONTROL OBJECTIVES

Strategic Offensive Reductions

Strategic defense could be a detour around Moscow's consistent refusal to agree to deep stabilizing reductions in nuclear systems--particularly its land-based missiles, which have the capability to destroy retaliatory forces--in two ways: first, it could achieve some if not all of the objectives of arms reductions even without any actual reductions; second, it could act as an incentive to prod Moscow to agree to actual reductions and provide confidence for each side that deep reductions would not grant a unilateral advantage to the other.

Depending on its effectiveness, a unilaterally deployed U.S. defensive system that protects U.S. ICBMs in effect could reduce the total threat from Soviet warheads at least as much as would a treaty which reduces warhead levels to the U.S.-proposed START level of 5,000 warheads. The deployment would also be stabilizing since it would protect U.S. land-based retaliatory forces, which are becoming increasingly vulnerable to Soviet surprise attack.

SDI critics respond that Moscow would just increase its warheads to make up for this de facto arms control impact of deploying defenses. But the cost to the defense, particularly for protection of missile sites, may well be significantly less than the cost to the offense of seeking to penetrate it.

The Soviets could also seek technological responses to overcome U.S. defenses, but again the costs may well be very high and the technological complexities great. Some such measures would actually require significant change in the character of much of the Soviet missile force.¹¹ For example, Moscow could reduce the number of warheads per missile, or the megatonnage per missile, in an attempt to overcome U.S. defenses. Such actions would be intended to evade U.S. defenses by enabling Soviet missiles to travel faster or warheads to maneuver rapidly. But such actions would also be de facto arms control since they would reduce Soviet total first-strike-capable nuclear warheads. Again, cost and technological problems may well lead Moscow to negotiate rather than to proliferate offensive systems or develop extensive countermeasures.

11. For discussion of the cost-ratio and Soviet countermeasures issues see: Francis P. Hoerber, "In the Key Battle of Comparative Costs, Strategic Defense is the Winner," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 442, July 5, 1985; and Thomas Krebs, "Moscow's Many Problems in Countering a U.S. Strategic Defense System," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 454, September 17, 1985.

Moscow never makes substantive concessions for nothing; as a Soviet official told a U.S. negotiator: "We are not philanthropists." The prospect of a deployed SDI system, which could negate Soviet first strike capability as well as force costly modifications of Moscow's strategic forces, is more likely to induce genuine Soviet bargaining than have past U.S. approaches. Defense strategist Keith Payne argues: "A U.S. force posture which denies the Soviet Union any theory of victory (by protecting U.S. ICBMs) and preserves the American homeland would provide the U.S. with sufficient bargaining leverage to bring the Soviet Union into serious negotiations."¹²

If, over time, Moscow becomes convinced that the West is able to degrade the ability of Soviet offensive forces to destroy U.S. forces in a first strike, it may agree to restructure the existing strategic environment through a combination of the build-down of strategic offensive forces and buildup of defenses.¹³

In addition to serving as an incentive to serious arms bargaining by the Kremlin, defenses could also provide the essential missing element in a mutual transition to greatly reduced nuclear forces. With the thousands of warheads each side currently possesses, relatively small numbers of hidden nuclear weapons would not significantly affect the strategic balance--although cheating provides strong evidence that basic interests in mutual stability may not be shared. If, however, both sides were to reduce substantially to, let's say, 300 warheads each, then even a relatively small number of successfully hidden weapons could provide a significant advantage in time of crisis or conflict.

Neither side is likely to agree to such deep reductions even with strict verification under current circumstances. This reluctance will grow because newer technologies such as small mobile missiles are even more difficult to verify than current systems. But, were each side to possess strategic defenses, it could have some confidence that a relatively small number of additional missiles secretly possessed by the other side would not suddenly and significantly change the strategic relationship or provide sufficient warheads for a successful first strike.

In fact, SDI would reinforce the positive impact of lower levels at whatever total number. For example, if the Soviets eliminated a

12. Keith Payne, "Deterrence, Arms Control, and U.S. Strategic Doctrine," Orbis, Fall 1981, p. 764.

13. For further discussion of the defensive transition, see Loren Thompson, "Mangaging the Transition from Nuclear Offense to Strategic Defense," Heritage Foundation Background No. 459, September 30, 1985; and W. Bruce Weinrod, ed., Assessing Strategic Defense: Six Roundtable Discussions, Heritage Lecture Series No. 38, April 1985.

major portion of their heavy land-based missiles in return for U.S. disposal of some of its strategic missiles, strategic defense would actually magnify the impact of the accord by reducing the likelihood that any remaining missiles could hit their intended targets.

Strategic Stability

Strategic defenses could reinforce and strengthen stability. Even limited defenses of military sites (so-called terminal or hard site defenses) such as the MX missile could raise considerably the uncertainty of Soviet planners that a first-strike would neutralize U.S. retaliatory capacity. This in itself would deter Soviet attack. A broader defensive system that substantially protected U.S. society also would increase stability since Moscow would know that it could not achieve any rational objectives in a surprise attack or by escalation. As important, defenses would ease the need for instantaneous nuclear response to an apparent attack since an accidental or unidentified launching by a smaller nation could be blocked before reaching the U.S.

Even if it did nothing more than force a Soviet shift to slower delivery systems with less capability for destruction of ballistic missile systems, SDI would have furthered strategic stability. Such systems are slower, less destructive, and therefore less destabilizing, since there is little threat of a sudden totally devastating first strike attack.

Arms Race Stability

Critics of SDI argue that its deployment would inevitably lead to a new cycle of offensive and then defensive deployment ad infinitum thus defeating the chances of arms control. But, as noted, there is evidence that the cost to the Soviets of a major offensive response to strategic defense would be so high that Moscow would have a strong incentive to negotiate. In any event, since approaches to arms control that ban defense have failed conspicuously to prevent major growth in strategic arsenals or a decrease in stability, or in fact prevent major Soviet efforts to improve their defensive capabilities, another approach is worth a try. The introduction of defenses eventually may spur a primarily or exclusively defensive competition that would be a significant move away from the nuclear threat.

Arms Race in Space

Concerns about a possible "arms race in space" must be considered in the context of such factors as past and current extensive Soviet

14. See Manfred Hamm and David Rivkin, In Strategic Defense, Moscow is Far Ahead," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 409, February 21, 1985.

military space efforts,¹⁴ Soviet possession of the only operational ABM system and only fully tested anti-satellite weapon (ASAT), the difficulties in verifying an ASAT pact, and the potential positive impact of strategic defense on the arms control process.

First-Strike Capability and SDI

SDI critics, as well as Moscow, also suggest that defenses would destabilize the strategic balance by giving the U.S. a "first strike" capability. It would do so, according to the argument, because it would enable the U.S. to strike first at Soviet missiles and then protect itself against retaliation from the surviving missiles.

Even were the U.S. to possess a first-strike capability, it would not inevitably be destabilizing. The period of U.S. decisive strategic superiority in the late 1950s was quite stable in terms of the superpower nuclear relationship. Further, a democracy is quite unlikely to launch a nuclear attack unless under immediate threat to its survival.

More important, it is likely to be several decades before the U.S. could have a defensive system deployed that would be sufficiently reliable to prevent substantial Soviet retaliatory damage to the U.S. With or without SDI, moreover, it would be many years before the U.S. would have enough offensive weapons of the type that would represent a first-strike danger to Moscow. It is also possible that the U.S. and USSR will develop their defenses together, with neither side gaining a sudden major advantage over the other, especially since these highly complex systems take years to build and deploy. Finally, if this "destabilizing" argument ever were to become a real obstacle to a U.S.-Soviet accord, the U.S. could deactivate certain offensive systems, in the distant future, to ensure that its combined offense-defense capability would not constitute a first-strike threat.

SDI and Damage Limitation

U.S. unilateral defenses could achieve another traditional objective of arms control--limiting damage should a nuclear conflict occur. Strategic defense potentially could shield the U.S. from 99 percent of incoming warheads. While the remaining 1 percent would cause substantial destruction, it would be considerably less than the total societal devastation possible under current circumstances. Further, since warheads would penetrate U.S. defenses on a random basis, the Soviets would have no way to assure that the damage that did occur would meet their attack objectives. Strategic defenses also could reduce the number of exploding warheads enough to prevent a "nuclear winter."

DEFENSIVE TRANSITION AND ARMS CONTROL

The transition to a defense-dominant strategic environment could be achieved either unilaterally or by mutual agreement. The best options for such a transition of course will remain unknown until the defensive technologies capabilities are more fully explored. Certain guidelines for pursuing the synergistic relationship between strategic defense and arms control nonetheless already are apparent. They include:

Maintain Necessary Offensive Modernization: For the foreseeable future, strategic offensive weapons will remain a significant part of the U.S.-Soviet strategic balance. As such, a modern offensive strategic force, developed within the context of the new defensive transition logic, is absolutely necessary for U.S. security and as an inducement to serious Soviet arms control bargaining. For example, MX silo hardening and deceptive basing would combine modernization with features useful if strategic defenses are deployed.

Develop Options for Unilateral Transition: A mutually agreed transition to a defense-dominant strategic balance is preferable. But if Moscow refuses to discuss a mutual defensive transition, the U.S. should proceed on its own. If executed properly, unilateral deployment could achieve some traditional arms control objectives and provide the necessary incentive for the Kremlin eventually to bargain seriously on a defensive transition.

Unilateral deployment of effective defenses by itself could strengthen deterrence. Since Moscow would be much less certain that it successfully could hit its intended targets in a first strike, it would be less likely to do so. If defenses proved less costly, and not susceptible to countermeasures, then unilateral U.S. deployment also could prompt Moscow to shift to slower, more stable and less first-strike-capable offensive systems. Unilateral defenses would also reduce damage incurred should a nuclear attack occur.¹⁵ Further, once the process of defensive deployment begins, the Kremlin may well change its mind and begin to bargain for a mutual transition.

The starting place for a unilateral transition would be a defense of U.S. ICBM and critical command, communication and control (C³) sites. Even many SDI critics acknowledge the technical feasibility of such a defense. It would strengthen traditional offense-based deterrence during the transition period to defense.

15. The argument that a unilateral deployment would be destabilizing or give the U.S. a first strike capability are discussed in the section on strategic stability.

Develop Mutual Transition Options: While parallel defensive deployments without agreement could work, the best approach would be a negotiated mutual defensive transition that included provisions for very substantial reductions of offensive strategic weapons. The best methods of transition will have to be based upon technological capabilities not yet determined, but a number of suggestions have already been made that demonstrate the practical possibilities:

- o As each side deploys defenses, a calculation could be made concerning the percentage of the opponents' warheads that could be blocked; each side then reduces its own warhead force by the number required to maintain a rough balance between the two sides;

- o Over the next decade both sides would reduce very substantially and then eliminate multiple independently targeted warheads (MIRVs), alternately a small number of MIRVs would be protected by very effective defenses;

- o Gradually shift away from MIRVs to a small number of single warhead mobile missiles; add strategic defenses to make this even more stable, as the side that attacked first would use up more warheads in the attack than could be destroyed by it;

- o Follow physicist Edward Teller's suggestion that after a defensive system which can intercept missiles in their launch phase was operational, the U.S. and Moscow agree that all launchings must be inspected prior to liftoff; if anything is launched without inspection, it would be shot down.

- o As an adjunct to the reduction or elimination of MIRVs, other offensive systems such as bombers and air-launched cruise missiles would be reduced and defenses against them phased in as technological development permits.

- o Immediately modify the ABM Treaty to permit more extensive defenses of military sites.

One way to facilitate such a mutual transition would be a sharing of the required technology. The security implications of this idea should be carefully reviewed. It should only be considered within the context of prior agreement and implementation of very substantial Soviet offensive strategic force reductions accompanied by strong verification mechanisms.

In any event, in such a defensive transition, units of account must be devised which yield a balanced reduction in areas such as kill probabilities as measured by the ratio of warheads to targets.

Limited Confidence-Building Measures: Any arms control agreement, including one incorporating strategic defenses, could be enhanced by so-called confidence-building measures. These are intended to give each party assurance that the other is not taking

actions that could allow it to launch a surprise or massive attack. Confidence building and the defensive transition could be helped by a requirement for advance notification of all missile launches to avoid unnecessary military alerts or actual use of defensive systems; establishment of agreed "keep-out" zones around space-based defensive systems; and arrangements to protect defensive components from surprise attack by the other side. These arrangements could include "rules of the road" designating where each sides' space systems can be located as well as designated "keep-out zones" surrounding space defensive systems where no other space objects could legitimately intrude.

Develop SDI-Integrated Arms Positions: The U.S. should continue to press Moscow to discuss at Geneva strategic defense-related issues and a negotiated defensive transition. Washington should prepare a series of options for integrating defensive systems, as well as the conceptual framework for a defensive transition into the arms control talks. The general objectives would be precisely those of traditional Western arms control: to reduce the number of weapons in a stable manner (to eliminate capability for a successful first-strike), to lower the risk of nuclear war, and to reduce the damage which would occur should conflict break out. A further objective, and one which would result in a fundamental change in the post World War II strategic situation, would be to reduce offensive nuclear capabilities to the point where neither side could inflict catastrophic damage on the other.

There are several possible U.S.-Soviet strategic balances that could be envisioned which integrate varying levels and types of defensive systems from hard-site to full population defense. The U.S. should develop and consider the strategic implications of these options and the new strategic doctrines which might be required. In this review process, U.S. national security interests and not arms control per se must be the highest objective. The review should also consider which offensive weapons may be useful during a transition and as a residual force thereafter.¹⁶

OTHER POLICY ISSUES

Midgetman and the Transition

The Administration should review the merits of the "Midgetman" missile in the context of a defensive strategy and a defense-dominant arms control regime. The Midgetman, which is a proposed new small, mobile single-warhead missile, could contribute to strategic stability

16. See Thompson, op. cit.

by reducing offensive nuclear power and making this power less vulnerable. On the other hand, the Midgetman would not be very capable of penetrating effective Soviet defenses because it would have only a single warhead and only limited penetration aids.

Transitional Offensive Arms Pact

An offensive arms reduction pact may or may not be a positive development depending upon such factors as verifiability and its impact upon stability and U.S. security. A pact should be considered only if it does not have a significant impact on SDI development or potential deployment. It should encourage strategic force structures which are consistent with the logic of a defensive evolution. Ideally, it should be designed as the first phase of a defensive transition.

ABM Treaty and the Transition

If an effective defensive system is to be deployed, the ABM Treaty probably will have to be revised or abrogated. In fact, it will have to be renegotiated in any event. As SDI critic John Rhinelander has observed, without renegotiation the ABM Treaty "will whither away even if not formally amended or abrogated. Technological change will not sit still."¹⁷ The proper timing of a move to modify or terminate the treaty is a subject of legitimate debate. But the Administration should begin the intellectual groundwork for change, explaining that the treaty has not fulfilled its intended purposes, is being overtaken by technology, is a barrier to a defensive transition, and that its spirit and terms have been violated by Moscow.

Defensive Transition and the Allies

Any long-term transition strategy must consider the views and security interests of U.S. allies. More important, it should assess ways in which a defensive transition can be integrated with allied arms control concerns related specifically to Europe. In this regard, the technological possibilities for protecting NATO nations against the SS-20 and other shorter-range systems should receive the highest priority. Even a unilateral NATO deployment could serve the objectives of arms control by substantially reducing the effectiveness of the SS-20 force. Further, since there may be no way to verify effectively whether newer missiles are carrying conventional or nuclear warheads, defensive systems¹⁸ may be the only means of protection against nuclear attack.

17. Rhinelander, op. cit., p. 14.

18. See W. Bruce Weinrod and Manfred R. Hamm, "Strategic Defense and America's Allies," Heritage Foundation Background No. 425, April 16, 1985.

Indirect SDI Treaty Impairment

While pursuing the possibility of a defensive transition, the U.S. should avoid committing itself to any agreements on other issues which could inhibit essential elements of strategic defense. For example, a ban on anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons testing could impair SDI progress because several technologies important to an effective strategic defense, such as kinetic energy weapons, are also being tested in the ASAT program.¹⁹ Further, a comprehensive ban on nuclear weapons testing would prevent testing of the X-ray pumped laser which would be powered by a small nuclear explosion. Many experts believe X-ray laser technology is a promising possibility as part of a defensive system.

CONCLUSION

The 1970s arms control process did not achieve the anticipated results. In particular, the vulnerability of U.S. retaliatory forces has significantly increased. In view of past failures, new thinking and new concepts are needed. If an offensive strategic reduction agreement is developed as the agreed first step in a defense transition, then it should be pursued. But it can only fulfill this role if such reductions are not made as a substitute for strategic defense.

The Administration should make clearer the potential connection between strategic defense and arms control objectives. It should develop and publicly suggest scenarios by which a mutual transition to a defensive strategic balance could be achieved. In the first stage, the strategic relationship would be stabilized as retaliatory forces were protected. Later phases could entail very deep reductions in offensive strategic forces and deployment of comprehensive strategic defense to protect against societal destruction.

The transition to strategic defense cannot occur overnight. Therefore, a carefully thought-out strategic conceptualization should be developed to guide the transition to a defense-dominant strategic relationship with the Soviet Union. Through the implementation of this new approach to arms control, the post-World War II vision of a world free of the threat of nuclear devastation might finally be achieved.

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19. See Robert Foelber and Brian Green, "Space Weapons: The Key to Assured Survival," Heritage Foundation Background No. 327, February 2, 1984.

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