

The Heritage Foundation **Background**

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WESTERN EUROPE WARMS TO SDI

(Updating Background No. 425, "Strategic Defense and America's Allies," April 16, 1985.)

West European support for Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is on the rise. The initial skepticism expressed by America's European allies about SDI is giving way inexorably to support for the program. Some key European allies have expressed their support for SDI, while others previously opposed are moderating their opposition. And West European officials and security experts are beginning to think much more about how strategic defense can serve specific European security interests.

In early December 1985, Great Britain signed a Memorandum of Understanding outlining the guidelines for participation of British industry in SDI research. This agreement allows not only the participation of British industry in SDI research but official government involvement as well. Britain has particular expertise in important aspects of SDI technology. Example: the sensors necessary to detect and track incoming ballistic missiles. Most promising in this area is British research on infra-red radiation detectors, which can identify and track the exhaust plumes of Soviet missiles in their boost-phase. The British also show promise in processing the data gleaned from infra-red radiation sensors. And they are well advanced in research on technologies for the terminal defense of ballistic missile sites.

The West Germans are equally eager to participate in SDI research. In an April 18, 1985, speech to the Bundestag, Chancellor Helmut Kohl set his policy on SDI. The program, he said, is militarily justifiable, politically necessary for the NATO alliance, and compatible with the security interests of the West as a whole. On December 18, 1985, the West German government agreed to negotiate the terms of participation in SDI. The talks will establish guidelines for safeguarding the transfer of sensitive U.S. technology to West Germany. Negotiators are making such good progress that the talks should be completed by late spring.

West Germany has much to offer SDI. The West German firm Dornier Systems is developing an "instrument pointing system." This stabilizes telescopes and other highly sensitive space instruments and could be used to aim space-based weapons accurately. Other prospects for West German participation are Dornier System's free electron laser for intercepting Soviet ballistic missiles, and Messerschmidt-Blohm-Bolkow's chemical laser for short-range air defense, which could be deployed to defend European missile sites.

What may be most encouraging about changing West German attitudes is new thinking about conventional applications of strategic defense technologies. Defense Minister Manfred Woerner, for example, was at first very skeptical of SDI. Recently, however, he has stated that a non-nuclear European antimissile system should be built "irrespective of the ultimate decisions that may be made in the United States with respect to SDI." What worries Woerner is the growing threat of Soviet missiles armed with conventional warheads. He believes that a European Defense Initiative is necessary to expand the conventional air defense capabilities of the NATO alliance.

Perhaps the most surprising SDI turnaround has occurred in France. While Paris still balks at government-to-government participation in SDI, it is no longer opposed to French companies competing for SDI contracts. Hubert Vedrine, an advisor to French President Francois Mitterrand, suggests that French national laboratories could join in SDI research. Opposition leaders Raymond Barre and Jacques Chirac support SDI. And even Defense Minister Paul Quiles, who has been a vociferous SDI critic, now admits SDI will lead to "partial successes, surely very spectacular ones."

The Italians too are poised to join SDI research. Rome has yet to decide on official participation in SDI, but Italian industry is eager to get started as soon as possible. Prime Minister Bettino Craxi will propose SDI participation to the Cabinet and the Italian Parliament at the end of March. The Italians are expected to follow the West German lead and sign an agreement sometime this year.

On SDI, Western Europe has undergone a fundamental change of heart. The Reagan Administration has made great gains in convincing West Europeans to participate in SDI. West European industry has significant contributions to make to research on strategic defensive systems not only for the U.S. but for Western Europe as well. West European science will benefit from working with Americans on cutting-edge technology; West European economies will benefit from SDI-generated contracts and jobs; and West European democratic societies will benefit from the protection against Soviet attack that an SDI peace shield will provide.

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