

The Defense and Space Talks: The Prospects for a Breakthrough

By Baker Spring

We are in an era of arms control. President Bush recently signed protocols to the Threshold Test Ban Treaty and the Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, which will allow these two agreements to be ratified. The Administration hopes to conclude the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) by the end of this year. Negotiations are currently underway to cut conventional forces in Europe. But most important from the viewpoint of strategic stability and preventing nuclear war, we are engaged in negotiations with the Soviet Union at the Defense and Space Talks (DST). These talks concern allowing both sides to deploy strategic defenses on a mutual basis, deployments that are currently limited by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Given all this activity in arms control, it is likely that arms control will have an important impact on the debate over the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

Keeping this fact in mind, I am very excited about the prospects for a breakthrough in DST. If the United States remains steadfast in its pursuit of the SDI program and in defending its negotiating position at DST, I believe that the Soviets will come to agree to a treaty that will allow the deployment of effective strategic defenses. Let me explain why.

Since arms control negotiations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union resumed in 1985, Moscow has attempted to use the arms control process to cripple the U.S. SDI program. The Soviets have done so primarily by linking the prospect for arms control success to a U.S. commitment not to deploy SDI, or even test certain experimental SDI systems. Eventually, however, the Soviets abandoned this "linkage" in negotiations over the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and have taken limited steps toward abandoning such linkage in START. They have not, however, accepted the U.S. position at DST, which is intended to facilitate an agreement allowing the mutual deployment of strategic defenses to complement the reduction of offensive forces, a so-called "cooperative defense transition."

Soviets Reconsidering. There is, however, some recent evidence that the Soviet Union is reconsidering its opposition to the agreed mutual deployment of defenses. Moscow could well be edging toward a historic agreement at DST. Recent articles in Soviet journals indicate that an important policy debate is taking place in Moscow in which one side is advocating that the Soviet Union abandon its opposition to mutual defenses and explore a compromise agreement within the "cooperative transition" framework proposed by the U.S., i.e., combining offensive reductions with the deployment of defenses.

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One of these articles appeared in the December 1989 issue of *Soviet Military Review*. Its author is identified as Mikhail Aleksandrov from the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Aleksandrov argues that Moscow ought to abandon as unrealistic the goal of killing SDI. He goes on to state that: "It appears that if the trend towards the development of defence technologies is correctly oriented, it may, far from leading to destabilization, result in a better model of strategic stability than the one we have." Aleksandrov's point is exactly the same one that SDI advocates in the U.S. have been making for years.

Questioning the ABM Treaty. Another article, appearing in the March 1989 issue of a journal of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, is authored by Ednan Agayev, also identified as a member of the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Agayev questions the continuing validity of the ABM Treaty, long an impediment to the notion of deploying defenses, and observes that: "...in order to get to the truth it is necessary to call everything in question. And hasn't the 'offensive deterrence' been long ripe for that? The only modern deterrence is defensive. And its prerequisites, even if they are only intellectual, already exist."

There even have been some sympathetic nods toward mutual defenses from senior Soviet military officers. Major General V. Belous published an article in the March 23, 1990, issue of *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, which argues that a reasonable compromise between Moscow and Washington is possible on the issue of mutual defenses. Belous concludes the article by identifying a specific proposal for mutual defenses that would provide protection against missiles possessed by third parties. He states: "One of the plans for this kind of defense proposes siting 1,000 ground-based interceptor-missiles in six areas of the United States. Mindful of the current realities, we should hardly deny the possibility of reasonable compromises in the future and development of defenses for U.S. and U.S.S.R. territory against accidental missile launches or blackmail attempts and threats made by third countries."

These revelations may come as a surprise to many Americans who think that the Soviets are unalterably opposed to strategic defense. If one looks at the postwar military and diplomatic history of the Soviet Union, however, it is not so surprising that the Soviets may be prepared to agree to mutual strategic defenses. Soviet negotiators at DST have not yet changed their position, but as Assistant Secretary of Defense Stephen Hadley said on this matter that "if a change is coming, Soviet negotiators will be the last to know."

Why might the Soviets reverse ground and work for an agreement with the U.S. in DST. The following points should be kept in mind about the Soviet approach to strategic defense and national security:

1) The Soviets have never accepted U.S. notions of deterrence and they place highest military priority on "defending the homeland."

Despite their acceptance of the ABM Treaty, the Soviets have never believed that mutual vulnerability to nuclear attack, the underlying premise for the U.S. policy of deterrence, should be a guide to strategy. Senior Soviet political and military officials have long criticized this U.S. notion. As Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev stated in 1987, "Attempts to prove that nuclear weapons have been and must remain the most effective means of deterrence and that only the strategy of 'nuclear deterrence' would preserve peace are continuing. In practice, however, it is precisely this strategy that has time and again brought the world to the brink of nuclear catastrophe, created an unpredictable atmosphere, and created fear and mistrust in the politics and practice of international politics."

While it is not Soviet military policy to seek a nuclear conflict with the U.S., its military doctrine is based on conducting such a war, if it came, with the intention of protecting its national institutions to the greatest extent possible. As such, the Soviets have supported a military doctrine premised on the objective of limiting damage to the Soviet Union in the event of war — a “damage limitation” goal.

2) Soviet military planners have always sought a balance between offensive and defensive forces, even at the strategic level.

To support the objective of limiting damage to the Soviet Union in the event of war, Soviet leaders have long endorsed the notion of using strategic offensive and defensive forces. The primary role of offensive forces would be to destroy as much of the West’s nuclear capability as possible in a first strike, before Western forces could be launched. The ABM Treaty actually plays an important “defensive” role for the Soviets in this regard by leaving U.S. retaliatory forces undefended against a Soviet first strike. The role of Soviet strategic defenses has been secondary but still important: to protect against those Western nuclear weapons that survive initial destruction and are launched.

If the Soviets were philosophically opposed to strategic defenses, it is difficult to explain why they have deployed the one ABM site allowed by the ABM Treaty, deployed and continually upgraded the world’s thickest strategic air defense system, placed a high priority on deep underground bunkers for the military and political leadership, and overall, spent roughly half their strategic budget on defenses. Taking the traditional view of military doctrine, Soviet military leaders tend to believe that a balance between offensive and defensive forces represents the ideal military posture, even in the nuclear age.

3) Moscow has been discussing a “defense-oriented” doctrine.

According to Soviet military leaders, the Soviet Union recently has adopted a more defense-oriented military doctrine. In terms of conventional forces it is becoming increasingly clear what the Soviets have in mind. The ability of the Soviet military to conduct an aggressive charge against allied forces in Europe, for example, is diminishing. It could be that this defensive doctrine is now to be applied to Soviet strategic forces. A defense-oriented strategic doctrine may mean accepting offensive reductions and emphasizing strategic defenses in their force posture. In fact, Aleksandrov alluded to this view in his article by stating: “The model of defence domination [in strategic forces] will make it possible to switch over, in deed, and not in word, to a defensive military doctrine at all levels of confrontation.” In this case, the goal of damage limitation would be served more and more by defensive forces alone, and the Soviets would move away from offensive first-strike strategies.

4) The emerging threat posed to Moscow by third parties possessing ballistic missiles is even more immediate than that facing the U.S.

Recent reports of Iraqi agents caught attempting to export illegal nuclear triggering devices and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s threat to attack Israel with chemical weapons and “make fire eat up half of Israel” have focused world attention on the problem of the proliferation of missiles and weapons of mass destruction. While the U.S. needs to develop defenses to protect its territory against third party missiles that will emerge by the end of the decade, Moscow must worry even more about defending its territory from such threats.

Many of the countries likely to possess ballistic missiles in the 1990s are close to Soviet borders. Third party missiles will be able to threaten targets deep into Soviet territory. Countries other than the U.S. that now reportedly possess missiles capable of reaching Soviet territory include China, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Moscow must be anxious to obtain a defense against a missile attack that could be initiated from any number of these countries. As the Chief of the Main Staff of the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces, Colonel General Kochemasov recently observed, "Say nuclear missile weapons fall into the hands of irresponsible, incompetent people. What then? Any use of such weapons could provoke World War III. That is a terrible danger." The Soviets clearly recognize the emerging danger posed by missile proliferation, and see mutual defenses as a possible response.

5) The Soviets have sought to curtail U.S. strategic defense programs only as a means to support their offensive force requirements.

When the Soviets agreed to the ABM Treaty in 1972 and adopted a policy of curtailing SDI through arms control in 1985, they did so because they wanted to slow down or stop the U.S. strategic defense program while they quietly continued to work on their own defensive program. As pointed out above, Soviet agreement to the ABM Treaty did not reflect a deep-seated opposition to the idea of strategic defenses or a commitment to the Western notion of stability.

It is likely that Moscow was not at all keen on the idea of abandoning a nation-wide defense of its territory against ballistic missiles, as required by the ABM Treaty. In fact, evidence suggests that Moscow never intended to abandon its ambition of a territorial strategic defense in 1972, the restrictions of the ABM Treaty notwithstanding. The Soviets may well have thought they could have their cake and eat it too by secretly preparing for such a defense while depending on the ABM Treaty to strangle any equivalent effort in the U.S. Arms control compliance reports by both the Reagan Administration and the Bush Administration suggest that the Soviets have been developing the base for a territorial missile defense.

Now that the U.S. too is pursuing missile defenses, the Soviets are finding that they have to choose between the mutual deployment of defenses or clinging to the ABM Treaty. In a highly embarrassing admission on October 23, 1989, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze stated publicly that the Soviet ABM radar at Krasnoyarsk was a purposeful violation of the ABM Treaty and that the Soviet Union would dismantle it. Now that the Soviets are facing the stark choice between adhering to the ABM Treaty or mutual strategic defenses, they may ultimately choose strategic defenses.

6) Soviet arms control negotiating tactics include the propensity to adopt new positions through dramatic reversals of previous policies.

While the U.S. tends to edge toward compromises in arms control negotiations, the Soviets frequently take a flamboyant approach by reversing themselves entirely on previous positions. They did this in 1985 after the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Geneva, Switzerland, when they "de-linked" the INF negotiations from SDI. Of course, they sometimes reverse themselves again in order to test U.S. resolve, as they did with the linkage between INF and SDI. (The Soviets "re-linked" the two negotiations during the Reykjavik summit in 1986 and then "de-linked" the two negotiations for the final time in 1987). But such tactics are part of the Soviet negotiating style.

Thus, while many will be surprised if the Soviets announce their acceptance of an SDI deployment at the DST negotiations, it will not be surprising to those familiar with Soviet negotiating tactics. In fact, it would be prudent for the Bush Administration to plan now how it might respond to likely Soviet willingness to compromise in DST if the U.S. maintains its position and commitment to SDI.

7) The Soviets now realize that President Bush is serious about deploying SDI and that the U.S. is technologically capable of deploying effective missile defenses.

It is no coincidence that Moscow may be seeking a compromise on SDI now. After trying to "wait out" President Reagan on this issue, Moscow has seen that President Bush is supportive of SDI. A central theme that runs through the Soviet articles cited above is that SDI is not a pipe dream, that the U.S. will not abandon the program, and that there are real benefits of mutual defenses in the strategic environment of the 1990s.

Then SDI Director Lieutenant General George Monahan stated in testimony before a House subcommittee on April 4 that he has heard second hand that the Soviets are convinced that the U.S. has the technological capability to deploy an effective defense against strategic missiles. Monahan's thoughts on the Soviet view of the technological feasibility of strategic defenses were supported by the reported reaction of Soviet scientists to briefings they received when they visited two SDI facilities last December. Reportedly, they were amazed at what American scientists working on SDI had achieved, particularly with regard to miniaturizing SDI components for deployment in space.

SDI AND DST: A CLEAR AGENDA

Evidence is mounting that the U.S. may have a historic opportunity in the DST negotiations to reach an agreement with the Soviets to establish a new foundation of mutual defenses for U.S.-Soviet security. As such, DST has much more potential for significant change than START. START seeks only to adjust U.S. and Soviet strategic forces at the margin, whereas DST seeks to alter fundamentally the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship. But realizing the benefits of a DST treaty and the deployment of SDI is by no means a certainty. I expect the Soviets to make at least one more run at killing the SDI program through the arms control process without having to give anything in return. In order to ensure the deployment of SDI, the following steps need to be taken relative to DST and arms control:

1) Put more emphasis on the DST negotiations.

DST, despite its overriding importance, is often the forgotten stepchild of arms control. The Administration has not emphasized the importance of these negotiations enough as a matter of public diplomacy. As a result, the media have given relatively little coverage to issues related to DST, and the public is hardly aware the DST negotiations exist. The Administration needs to make more visible its policy toward the DST negotiations. Also, SDI supporters outside the Administration, who traditionally have been somewhat skeptical about the value of arms control generally, need to make it clear that a DST treaty along the lines proposed by the Administration is a treaty they are prepared to support.

2) Counter the Soviet policy of "linking" SDI to START.

The Soviets have resorted to the tactic of linking the SDI issue to other agreements with the purpose of crippling SDI. Currently they are linking it to START. While the Soviets have abandoned their previous policy of refusing to sign a START treaty unless the U.S. curtailed SDI, they now say that they will walk away from a signed START treaty if the U.S. abrogates or violates the ABM Treaty. Make no mistake about it, the current Soviet position is still one of linkage between SDI and START. If we are going to see the deployment of SDI, the U.S. will have to call the Soviet bluff on the issue of walking away from a future START treaty. And the Soviet position on this issue is a bluff because they need START far more than the U.S. does.

The Administration is fighting the Soviet linkage policy. But there may be an effort in the Senate to impose a requirement on the Administration to observe the ABM Treaty indefinitely during the advice and consent process for a START treaty. The ABM Treaty prohibits the deployment of effective strategic defenses. Such a proposal would be defended by sponsoring Senators as a means of protecting the offensive nuclear reductions achieved through START against a Soviet walkout. SDI proponents, including the Administration, should state clearly that they will not support a START treaty if this requirement is imposed either by Soviets or by the Senate. Such a statement will be the best way to counter the Soviet linkage policy. The Administration can also sidestep Soviet attempts at linkage by ensuring that a future DST treaty is a separate agreement that is in no way referenced by either the ABM Treaty or START.

3) Conclude a DST Treaty concurrently with START.

The U.S. can best influence the Soviets to agree to a DST treaty during the so-called end-game in the START negotiations, when the Soviets will be anxious to "lock in" START commitments. This is almost certain to take place later this year. The U.S. should not let pass this golden opportunity to press the Soviets on SDI. Unfortunately, the Administration currently thinks that issues relative to SDI and DST will be resolved after the conclusion of START. But according to Ambassador Henry Cooper, former Chief U.S. Negotiator to DST, a DST treaty is likely to be sufficiently short and simple that there is no technical reason why it could not be concluded this year. Concluding a DST treaty concurrently with START will also serve to overcome problems related to the Soviet policy of linkage between SDI and START by resolving problems in both areas at once. The Administration should not take at face value Soviet resistance to concluding DST at an early date. It should make a strong attempt to conclude a DST treaty concurrently with START.

4) Fund the SDI program.

There is no way the Soviets will negotiate seriously in DST if there is not demonstrable progress in the SDI program. They would have no incentive to do so. This will require that the Administration obtain adequate funding for SDI from Congress. Given the tone of ongoing debate over the defense budget generally, this is not going to be easy. But this is the most important item in the agenda I am outlining here. The SDI program must be adequately funded and demonstrating significant progress toward deployment if we are going to get the Soviets to reverse ground and accept a DST treaty.

Conclusion

Proving Perception Wrong. It has been the common perception that the Soviets would never agree to the deployment of the strategic defenses envisioned by the SDI program. But the common perception is proving to be wrong, or at least out of date. Evidence is mounting that the U.S. can successfully press for an agreement at DST, which would facilitate an end to the current U.S. strategic posture of utter vulnerability to the most destructive weapons man has ever invented. Such an agreement would represent a crowning achievement for the arms control process, which otherwise has been marked by many shortcomings, by truly improving the security of the nation.

