

WebMemo



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President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative Proposal 25 Years Later: A Better Path Chosen

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March 23 will mark the 25th anniversary of President Ronald Reagan's televised speech to the nation proposing the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) to protect the United States against missile attack.¹ This speech marked the point of departure for the basis of U.S. strategic policy away from the threat of retaliation and toward protecting the American people and territory against attack. President Reagan put it this way:

If the Soviet Union will join with us in our effort to achieve major arms reduction, we will have succeeded in stabilizing the nuclear balance. Nevertheless, it will still be necessary to rely on the specter of retaliation, mutual threat. And that's a sad commentary on the human condition. Wouldn't it be better to save lives than to avenge them? Are we not capable of demonstrating our peaceful intentions by applying all our abilities and our ingenuity to achieving a truly lasting stability?

The Heritage Foundation is proud to have been there *before* the President's historic speech. In 1982, The Heritage Foundation sponsored the release of the *High Frontier* study.² The study proposed using the U.S. technological lead in space to field just the sort of missile defense proposed by President Reagan. As the study's primary author, the late Lt. Gen. Daniel O. Graham, put it, "In the fall of 1981, High Frontier became a project of The Heritage Foundation where it has profited from the strong support of Mr. Edwin Feulner, Jr., President."³

Seeing Beyond the Cold War. History records President Reagan's speech as a response to the threat

posed by Soviet ballistic missiles at the height of the Cold War. President Reagan's visionary leadership, however, was based on advancing fundamental principles that remain valid well beyond the immediate context that gave rise to specific proposals. This is clearly the case with SDI.

President Reagan sought to diminish the Soviet Union's menacing threat of missile attack and hasten the end of the Cold War. SDI made a significant contribution toward realizing these goals.⁴ It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the basic rationale behind SDI collapsed with the end of the Cold War. In the post-Cold War world, ballistic missile and nuclear proliferation and a multi-polar strategic environment make President Reagan's preference for defense over the threat of retaliation more relevant, not less so. It is indeed the foundation for a "truly lasting stability."

Ronald Reagan's Three Enduring Principles Regarding Missile Defense. Fundamentally, President Reagan supported three core principles regarding missile defense that would be relevant beyond the Cold War. These same principles motivated President Bush's December 13, 2001, decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with the former Soviet Union, which prohib-

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ited the deployment of any effective missile defense system, and they continue to serve as the foundation for the ongoing effort to field ever more capable missile defense systems, albeit in fits and starts:

Principle #1: Refuse to accept U.S. vulnerability. President Reagan refused to accept the notion that vulnerability to attack represented a superior moral and strategic position for the United States. His rejection of vulnerability can be traced back to a 1979 visit to the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) in Colorado Springs, Colorado. During a briefing on what would happen if the Soviet Union launched a missile attack, he learned that NORAD would detect and track the missiles but would not be able to take any defensive measures.⁵ If the notion of the inherent stability in vulnerability was a dubious concept during the Cold War, where the U.S. contended with a single hostile superpower, it makes no sense in today's multi-polar (multi-player) strategic setting. Multilateralizing the policy of vulnerability is both destabilizing and counter-productive because the policy lacks flexibility in the multi-polar setting.⁶

Principle #2: Operate from a position of strength. President Reagan firmly believed that in order to be effective in achieving its national security and foreign policy goals, the U.S. had to operate from a position of strength.⁷ What was an applicable principle during the Cold War remains so today. As then, there is enormous leverage that accrues to the U.S. if it has the means to defeat the purpose of any

attack. Further, defeating the purpose of an attack does necessarily mean having a perfect defense. In fact, U.S. policymakers across the ideological spectrum are recognizing that defensive measures are the principal option when faced with the threat of suicide bombers.

Principle #3: Recognize that the U.S. will never be secure if its enemies are able to use space as an avenue for attack. President Reagan recognized that America's ability to control space militarily was of paramount importance to its security. This is why SDI focused on space-based options for defense, as recommended in the *High Frontier* study. The pursuit of the Brilliant Pebbles space-based interceptor was the most promising of these technological options.⁸ Today, more and more nations are obtaining access to space and thereby a new avenue for potentially attacking the U.S. and its vital interests. The proliferation of space-launch vehicles and ballistic missiles are at the heart of this trend.⁹ Unfortunately, the enduring principle behind President Reagan's SDI program is not receiving due consideration. The Brilliant Pebbles program was cancelled by President Bill Clinton in 1993 and remains dormant. The ability of the U.S. to defend its vital interests in and through space will only grow more important with the passage of time.

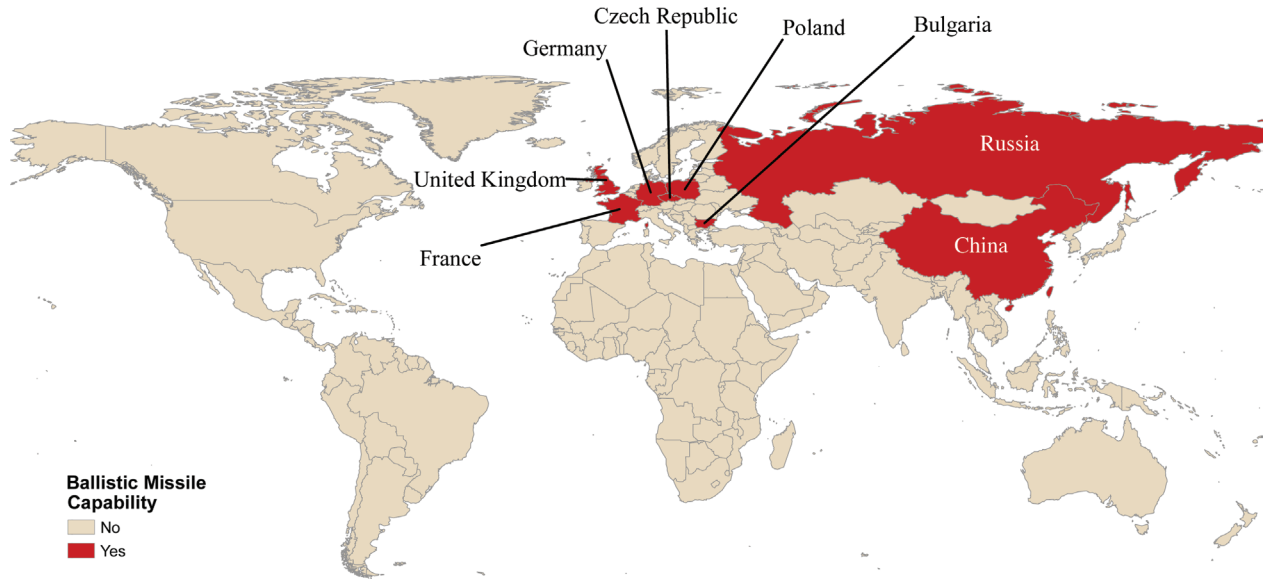
Conclusion. History frequently reveals lost opportunities to policymakers. President Ronald Reagan's 1983 speech proposing SDI, however, reveals the opposite. His boldness reaped immediate and long-term advantages, ranging from hastening the end of

1. U.S. Department of State, "Peace and National Security," *Current Policy* No. 472, March 1983.
2. Lt. Gen. Daniel O. Graham, *High Frontier: A New National Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: High Frontier, 1982).
3. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
4. Lt. General James A. Abrahamson and Ambassador Henry F. Cooper, "What Did Americans Get for the \$30 Billion Investment in SDI?" *Defending America: A Near- and Long-Term Plan to Deploy Missile Defenses* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1995), pp. 43–47.
5. Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005), pp. 37–39.
6. Nuclear Stability Working Group, *Nuclear Games: An Exercise Examining Stability and Defenses in a Proliferated World* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2005).
7. Edwin Meese III, *With Reagan: The Inside Story* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1992), p. 169.
8. Donald R. Baucom, "The Rise and Fall of Brilliant Pebbles," International Flight Symposium, October 23, 2001, and *Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (September 2004), pp. 145–190, as reprinted in *Independent Working Group on Missile Defense, the Space Relationship & the Twenty-First Century, 2007 Report* (Cambridge, Mass.: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2006), pp. d16–d36.
9. For a detailed description of the critical connection between national security and U.S. space-based defense capabilities, see *Independent Working Group on Missile Defense, the Space Relationship & the Twenty-First Century, 2007 Report*, pp. 30–39.

Map 1

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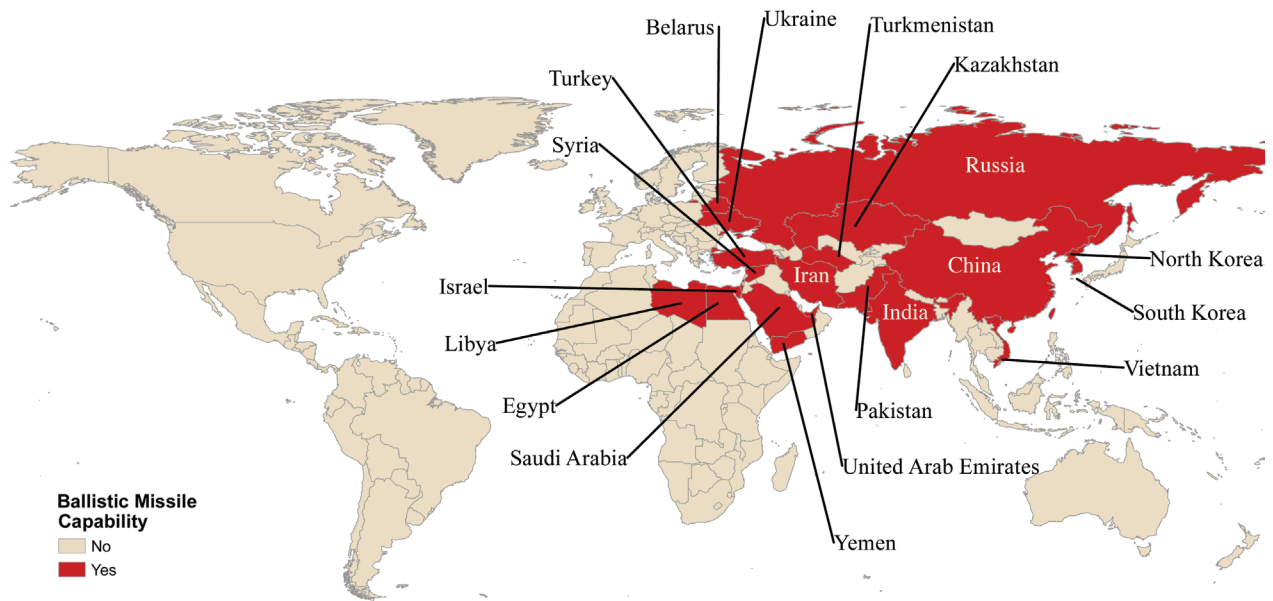
The Missile Age of 1972



Map 2

WM 1841

The New Missile Age – 2007



the Cold War to establishing the foundation for a U.S. strategic policy that accounts for and adapts to the perplexing challenges presented by a multi-polar world. The enduring power of a good idea is an amazing thing to behold.

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