

THE SDI DEBATE: A CRITIC'S PERSPECTIVE

PETER A. CLAUSEN

Almost three years after President Reagan initiated a major U.S. commitment to develop advanced ballistic missile defenses, two things are apparent. First, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) dominates the landscape of strategic and arms control policy as few issues have done before. Second, we still lack a coherent statement of the objectives of the program, its strategic rationale, and its relationship to other elements of American national security policy. This remarkable situation accounts for the unfocused and largely unproductive nature of the debate that has raged around the SDI since its inception. Proponents and critics of the program have argued past each other, seldom agreeing even on what the questions are, let alone the answers. We have yet to sort out the real from the false choices and to structure the issue of strategic defense in a way that would facilitate rational decisions.

As has often been pointed out, ballistic missile defense raises two kinds of questions — those of feasibility and those of desirability. Neither can be addressed without first carefully specifying the technical objectives and strategic functions of the defense — a condition the SDI debate has notably failed to satisfy.

Instead, that debate goes on at two very different levels. At the level of public perceptions and presidential rhetoric, it is about protecting American society from nuclear attack. The goal set forth by President Reagan is a defense so effective as to make nuclear weapons “impotent and obsolete,” replacing the policy of deterrence whereby the U.S. and the Soviet Union hold each other hostage to the threat of devastating retaliation. At the level of practical policy, however, the SDI is something much less radical. As described by SDI program managers, the objective is to use missile defenses to increase the uncertainty and complexity of a Soviet first strike. In essence, this means defending U.S. nuclear forces, in particular vulnerable land-based missiles, so as to preclude a successful

Peter A. Clausen is Senior Arms Analyst for the Union of Concerned Scientists and an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University. He is a co-author of *The Fallacy of Star Wars* (Vintage, 1984).

preemptive attack against them. The role of defenses here is not to shield American cities but to ensure the survival of nuclear retaliatory capabilities — the classic requirement of deterrence.

The disparity (indeed, contradiction) between these two versions of the SDI — one revolutionary, the other mundane — is striking. The first has compelling appeal but is almost certainly unattainable. The second is much less demanding technically, but may or may not be a prudent way to deal with the problem deterring a Soviet attack.

The President's vision of an invulnerable America is understood by virtually all technical specialists — both in and out of government — to be a fantasy, though it continues to provide the basis for public support of the SDI program. In order to deny the Soviet Union the physical capability of devastating American society, we would need a defense approaching perfection against all means of delivering nuclear weapons onto U.S. territory — not only ballistic missiles but bombers, low-flying cruise missiles, and all the conceivable ways that bombs might be smuggled into the country. Near-perfection is required simply because of the immense destruction that even a handful of nuclear weapons (of the approximately 10,000 currently targeted by the Soviet Union on the United States) would cause. A "leakage" through the SDI shield of only one percent of a full-scale Soviet attack would leave the U.S. exposed to historically unprecedented levels of death and destruction.

In these circumstances, vulnerability to nuclear attack is a fact of life for both superpowers. No foreseeable technical development can alter the high probability that nuclear war would be suicidal for both countries. Recognition of this fact is at the heart of nuclear deterrence and undoubtedly is a major reason — perhaps the decisive one — for the lack of armed conflict between the U.S. and Soviet Union during the post-war period. "Mutual assured destruction" (or "MAD") is not, as advocates of strategic defense often assert, a perverse policy of intentional vulnerability, but rather a description of the likely outcome of a nuclear war. As such it is a reminder that the only hope of protection is through the avoidance of nuclear war. In the absence of nuclear disarmament or a political reconciliation of the superpowers such that war between them becomes unthinkable, this means we will continue to rely on deterrence.

The real issue raised by SDI, then, is not, "Can we escape from our vulnerability to nuclear destruction?" It is, "Would a defense against Soviet missiles, of uncertain but less-than-perfect effectiveness, contribute positively to nuclear deterrence?" This is only in part a technical question; the critical issues have to do with strategy and politics and the dynamics of the U.S.-Soviet arms competition. A serious debate on the merits of

the question has scarcely begun. Such a debate would be facilitated by the acceptance of two ground rules.

First, advocates of SDI should drop the claim of moral superiority they often make for defenses. A shield corresponding to President Reagan's utopian goal would certainly be morally preferable to the existing balance of terror, but the same cannot be said for deterrence-enhancing defenses. As a way of deterring a Soviet attack, defenses are no more or less moral than other methods (such as hardened silos, mobile basing schemes, or submarine basing) for ensuring the survival of nuclear forces against a preemptive strike. In each case, the objective is to maintain the ability to do mortal damage to Soviet society — a point sometimes obscured by SDI supporters who attempt to portray "deterrence by denial" as an alternative to "deterrence by retaliation."

Second, there is a need for realistic net assessment of the strategic consequences of deploying ballistic missile defenses. The choice is not between the present world and one in which the U.S. is defended, but between the present and a world in which both superpowers are simultaneously deploying defenses and new offensive forces designed to counter and overcome those defenses. The judgment underlying the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which strictly limited missile defenses, was that the second world was likely to be considerably less stable — and less congenial to American interests — than the first. While it is appropriate that this judgment be reassessed as technical and political conditions change, the burden of proof is on those who would set aside the ABM treaty — surely the most significant constraint the superpowers have managed to place on the arms race — to allow SDI to proceed.

However, advocates of SDI have for the most part not supported their case with realistic analysis. Instead, they have made dubious assumptions about Soviet reactions to SDI and have displayed a perplexing blind spot regarding the contribution of the ABM treaty to their professed objectives of stable deterrence and arms control. For example, those who argue for defenses to strengthen U.S. deterrence of a Soviet first strike have consistently missed the point that the ABM treaty itself protects U.S. retaliatory capabilities by limiting Soviet defenses. In a world of defenses, we would sacrifice this protection. As a result, while more American missiles might survive a Soviet attack, fewer would reach their targets in the Soviet Union.

The outcome of this trade-off would depend on the relative effectiveness and coverage of U.S. and Soviet defenses. On *a priori* grounds, however, the U.S. would seem to have more to lose than to gain, since the majority of American nuclear warheads (those based on submarines) are already

invulnerable to preemptive attack: in exchange for protecting the vulnerable, land-based minority, we would be subjecting all of our missile warheads to the attrition that a Soviet defense would extract. If that defense were to achieve even a modest fifty percent effectiveness, the U.S. would suffer a net loss in retaliatory strength.

Of course, it is hardly likely that the U.S. would in practice allow this situation to develop; instead, it would invest in the new offensive weapons and countermeasures necessary to offset Soviet defenses and prevent the erosion of American deterrence. This was the pattern in the late 1960s when the U.S. developed multiple-warhead (MIRV) missiles in response to the Soviet deployment of an ABM system around Moscow. Nor is it likely that the Soviet Union would acquiesce in the erosion of its own deterrent that an American defense would cause. Yet SDI proponents seem to expect the Soviets to do just that, and indeed to accelerate the process by agreeing to cuts in offensive forces in the face of concerted American effort to develop effective defenses.

The notion that SDI is a catalyst to arms control (despite growing evidence that it is the key obstacle to progress at the Geneva talks) is perhaps the most novel and least plausible of the arguments used to support SDI. This is not to deny that a U.S. agreement to *curtail* SDI could well lead to an arms control breakthrough. But the President has repeatedly dismissed this use of the program as a "bargaining chip," and instead views deployed defenses as the cornerstone of a whole new arms control framework. The problem with this vision is that it assumes a level of cooperation, trust, and mutuality of interests between the superpowers that would be difficult to imagine even in the best of circumstances, and that is directly at odds with the Reagan administration's own ideological premises about U.S.-Soviet relations.

This incongruity points to a basic tension between two different models of the SDI's role in superpower relations. The first model posits that the transition to a "defense-dominant" world is in the mutual interests of the U.S. and Soviet Union, and should be pursued as a cooperative endeavor with arms control playing a central role. The second sees SDI as a way of improving America's strategic position relative to the Soviet Union by shifting the arms competition to areas of U.S. technological advantage. In this view, SDI should be used as a lever to seek arms control on U.S. terms; failing that, it should be deployed unilaterally.

These two models coexist uneasily within U.S. policy. The first is more prominent in the public rhetoric of the administration, but there is ample evidence that the second is closer to its ideological heart and informs its thinking about the strategic and military role of SDI. Needless to say, the second also dominates Soviet perceptions of the program.

Ironically, the first, "idealistic" approach to SDI is in theory the more realistic of the two. A defensive transition could be accomplished successfully only with the closest superpower cooperation. If attempted competitively, it would inevitably result in an acceleration of the offensive arms race and a steep decline in strategic stability. But in practice the political ingredients for a cooperative transition are not in sight. Moreover, the transformation of superpower relations that would make that transition possible would at the same time make it unnecessary: when the superpowers are finally ready to reduce significantly the role that nuclear weapons play in their relationship, they can accomplish this directly through deep cuts in their nuclear arsenals; until then, missile defenses will not force them to disarm against their will.

