

GORBACHEV'S REVERSAL ON STRATEGIC DEFENSE: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BUSH

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev on October 5 made what may turn out to be the most important statement on strategic defense by a world leader since Ronald Reagan's March 23, 1983 speech proposing the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI. In the midst of an otherwise disappointing response to George Bush's September 27 unilateral nuclear cutbacks, Gorbachev made an astonishing proposal: "We are prepared to consider proposals from the United States of America on non-nuclear anti-missile defense systems." This reverses nearly a decade of intense Soviet opposition to SDI and paves the way for the fulfillment of Reagan's vision of cooperative U.S.-Soviet defense deployments. It also deprives U.S. SDI opponents of a key ally. Bush quickly should seize this opportunity to present Moscow with a detailed plan for revising the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty to permit the limited deployment of strategic defenses. Bush also should press Congress to approve a 1996 deployment target for America's first SDI interceptors.

Since Reagan's 1983 speech, Moscow until last weekend had taken a hard line against strategic defenses. At the Defense and Space Talks (DST), which opened in 1985 to discuss SDI-related issues, Moscow consistently has opposed any easing of restrictions on the testing and deployment of anti-missile defense systems. The U.S., meanwhile, has urged Moscow to explore a "cooperative transition" from the existing nuclear "balance of terror"—in which both sides remain completely vulnerable to attack—to a more stable balance that includes defenses capable of protecting against an accidental or limited strike. With nuclear weapons and missile technology now spreading to many Third World countries, and with the Soviet Union unsure it will retain control over its own arsenal, defenses make ever more sense for both sides. Now Gorbachev has recognized this new reality.

Not Unexpected. To close observers of the Soviet scene, Gorbachev's reversal was not entirely unexpected. In a July 16 letter to the leaders of the seven major industrial nations, Gorbachev signaled Soviet willingness to develop "joint ABM early warning systems to prevent unauthorized or terrorist operated launches of ballistic missiles." In recent years, moreover, Soviet officials and academicians have engaged in an increasingly public debate over strategic defense. In June 1990, Keith Payne, President of the National Institute for Public Policy in Fairfax, Virginia, documented this debate, concluding that a change in Soviet policy might be in the offing. Among the evidence, a quote from Mikhail Aleksandrov, a Senior Expert in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Assessment and Planning Department, who wrote in December 1989 that: "the only way to a new strategic structure is that of gradual mutually agreed and coordinated steps, which might include phased deployment of ABM components...."

While Gorbachev's statement is a reversal in official Soviet diplomatic policy, it does not represent any change in Soviet military thinking on strategic defense. Today, as throughout the 1980s, the Soviet military spends about half its strategic budget on defense, including the construction of massive deep underground bunkers for Soviet leaders, an extensive civil defense network for the Soviet population, and a completely modernized anti-ballistic missile system for Moscow. As late as last year the Soviet mili-

tary-industrial complex continued to increase the production of missile defense interceptors, despite cut-backs in virtually every other weapon system. The Soviet Union's military emphasis on defense and its diplomatic opposition to SDI were complementary policies. Together they were designed to put as many constraints as possible on America's SDI system while maximizing Soviet protection within (and sometimes outside) ABM Treaty limits. Now Moscow has recognized that these limits, at least as they now stand, serve neither side's interests.

SDI Critics Refuted. SDI opponents in Washington consistently portrayed Soviet opposition to SDI as immutable, and used it to bolster their case against defenses. Matthew Bunn, Associate Director of the Arms Control Association, argued in a debate last November 7 at The Heritage Foundation that "just about the weakest, of the many weak links, in the chain of pro-SDI arguments [is] the idea that the Soviets may be reconsidering, and may soon agree to joint deployment of, strategic ballistic missile defenses." Only two months ago, Arms Control Association President Spurgeon Keeny wrote in *Arms Control Today* that Soviet military leaders are "entering the START [Strategic Arms Reduction] treaty only on the condition that the ABM Treaty remains in effect...A U.S. decision to initiate a major ABM deployment would be the one action that could still derail the START agreement. And without question, it would preclude the negotiation of deeper cuts in START II."

Gorbachev seems to have other ideas. His proposal to discuss mutual defensive deployments came in the same speech in which he announced a unilateral reduction in Soviet warheads to 1,000 below the number permitted by START, and proposed that both sides cut their post-START arsenals by half.

Growing Momentum. Bush's announcement of his Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (G-PALS) plan for SDI in January, the Senate's endorsement in August of limited strategic defense deployments by mid-decade, and now Gorbachev's announcement, make the deployment of strategic defenses by the U.S., and perhaps the Soviet Union, a near certainty. Bush should encourage the growing momentum in favor of strategic defense by advancing a concrete proposal at the Defense and Space Talks in Geneva for the mutual deployment of up to 800 ground and 1,000 space-based SDI interceptors along the lines of his G-PALS proposal. This also is the time for Bush to state unequivocally the need for Congress, which now is hammering out the final version of the 1992 Defense Authorization Bill, to set a firm date of 1996 for initial SDI deployments.

If Gorbachev's announcement ultimately paves the way for anti-missile defenses, it will be appropriate that opposition to SDI finally was buried in Moscow at the hands of perhaps the last "Soviet" president. There could be no more fitting ending for the drama Ronald Reagan set in motion eight years ago.

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For further information:

Baker Spring, "The Defense and Space Talks: The Prospects for a Breakthrough," *Heritage Lecture* No. 275, July 10, 1990.

Keith B. Payne, with Willis Stanley, "Soviet Statements Sympathetic to Mutual BMD Deployment," National Institute for Public Policy Information Series No. 182, June 1990.