

# SDI SUCCESSES AND SDI FAILURES: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE\*

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## INTRODUCTION: THE SDI DEBATE IN EUROPE

The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), or "Star Wars" as the newspapers have dubbed it, has proven to be perhaps the most important new weapons program since the development of the nuclear bomb. Naturally, it has also become the subject of very intense debate and widely differing interpretations.

Some advocates argue that the program has been very successful, developing more quickly than anyone had anticipated. In a *New York Times* interview printed on March 3, 1985, Lieutenant General James Abrahamson, until last fall the director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization, said, "There is very little question that we can build a very highly effective defense against ballistic missiles some day. The question is how soon and how affordable, and what degree of effectiveness can initial steps allow us." In the January 20, 1987, edition of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger said that he favours moving quickly towards deploying "phase one," a combination of landbased ABM systems, airborne infrared sensors and space-based "kinetic kill vehicles."

Critics, however, have argued that SDI is the major impediment to stopping the arms race. As a February 20, 1986, *Guardian* editorial put it, "The major obstacle to a reduction in strategic nuclear weapons is now the Americans' attachment to SDI. . . ."

## SDI, DETERRENCE AND THE WESTERN ALLIANCE

Some say SDI will precipitate a collapse of the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) and its forty-year alliance. A foreshadowing of this appeared at the NATO meeting in May of 1986; both Norway and Denmark footnoted the communique produced by the meeting with a strong disapproval of SDI and its ramifications. Critics point to such activities by NATO's member nations as evidence of the alliance's gradual weakening. On the other hand, others argue to the contrary that NATO remains in good shape. Indeed, according to some, SDI will strengthen the alliance.

Furthermore, while some suggest that nuclear deterrence will be enhanced as a consequence of SDI, numerous critics argue that it will in fact be destroyed. These critics anticipate that any defensive buildup will make isolationism a more

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viable alternative for the United States. In the offing, any notion of extended deterrence will lose credibility.

Finally, some conclude that SDI will disappear with President Ronald Reagan. Recent congressional reports have argued that SDI, on the grand scale initially conceived, is nearly technologically impossible. Furthermore, any new president, including George Bush, confronting the nation's huge budget deficit will be tempted to halt or scale down the SDI program.

### **THE MANY FACES OF SDI**

In many respects, SDI was a failure from the very beginning. President Reagan's original speech on March 23, 1983 was calculated to create support for increased arms funding in the United States Congress. It had the added goal of diverting attention from the debacle of the intermediate nuclear force reduction talks. However, the speech failed to accomplish these two objectives. The speech also failed with regard to the launching of the new program, especially where the practical implementation of SDI was concerned. No one, or almost no one, knew of the speech's contents beforehand, and the President created great confusion—which lasted for quite some time—when he signalled this new initiative without consulting with all the relevant branches of the United States government. Consequently, several very different conceptions of SDI, each with its own political purpose, developed under the umbrella-like rubric of SDI.

#### **SDI as a Defensive Panacea**

From the onset, President Reagan had his favorite version of SDI. It would be a totally leakproof type of continental defense that would not only eliminate the threat of nuclear destruction, but also render unnecessary any efforts directed towards deterrence, partial defence or extended deterrence. This so-called "ultimate vision" has been the backdrop against which have developed all other conceptions of SDI.

#### **SDI as a Research Program**

This conception looks at SDI as a genuine effort to test the feasibility of a total continental defense system. This recognizes that, while the ultimate goal remains President Reagan's one of full continental antimissile defense, for the time being SDI must go forward merely as a research program with the purpose of establishing whether such an end goal is technically feasible or not.

A second viewpoint looks at SDI as a research program, but one with no actually attainable goal. Holders of this conception feel that, since it is realistically impossible to foresee where SDI research will lead, there can exist no ultimate goal or vision. This conception of SDI was, and still is, favored among those who do not want to have acceptance of the SDI program made contingent on achieving President Reagan's ultimate goal of a total continental defense system.

#### **SDI as a Method of Enhancing Deterrence**

Since SDI involves partial defenses that can conceivably be deployed in the very near future, those who hew to this conception of SDI primarily view the program as a means to shield American land-based missiles. Those who advocate SDI from this point of view envision the program's radar and missile systems as

creating an elaborate silo protection scheme that may close the so-called “window of vulnerability.”

### **SDI as an Overall Western Defense**

The adherents of this viewpoint contemplate integrating various regional schemes presently undergoing development amongst America's allies. For those who subscribe to this viewpoint, the buildup of an enlarged and improved European inner defense system, combined with an anti-tactical ballistic missile system, would provide Europe with some sort of protection against nuclear threats. If such a system could be developed in Europe, in Japan, and perhaps even in the continental United States, then the possibility of developing a “thinner” space-based defence system becomes more credible. This is perhaps what ex-Secretary Weinberger had in mind when he proposed early deployment of SDI.

### **SDI as a Bargaining Chip**

Proponents of SDI from this point of view look forward to SDI compelling the Soviets to behave reasonably at the negotiating table. This version, as advocated by political opponents of the Reagan Administration, still finds support among many professional diplomats. In a February 1986 *Washington Post* column, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) wrote, “The Russians have now made it clear that they are willing to accept drastic reductions in their long-range warheads in exchange for limiting SDI to “basic research.” The real challenge is to draw the line between acceptable research—which would allow Mr. Reagan to explore his dream for a space shield—and unacceptable weapons deployment, which would violate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and launch a new and dangerously destabilizing escalation of the nuclear arms race.” Senator Kennedy sees Soviet-American compromise on SDI as the key to an arms control agreement. Other prominent proponents of the bargaining chip theory are McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan, Robert MacNamara and Gerard Smith. They have argued that, since Reykjavik, both the Reagan followers and their opponents can have their ways. The former can retain their end-vision of a nuclear-free world, and their opponents can be satisfied by a ten year delay before any kind of testing commences.

Apart from the above conceptions of SDI, there exist many other smaller, more specific versions which are being hawked in the marketplace of ideas. Still, the above versions define some of the major parameters of the ongoing SDI debate. One further version deserves mentioning; after Reykjavik, several officials began to talk about a scaled-down SDI to be put in place when all offensive nuclear arms have been negotiated away. This SDI should be an insurance against any attempts at a nuclear “breakout.”

It is interesting to note how the SDI program, given its many different conceptions, can be seen from different viewpoints as both a success and as a failure. This was demonstrated by actual actions of the Reagan Administration. For instance, in his July 1986 letter to Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, President Reagan suggested postponing the development of SDI for a certain period. This indicated that the administration was willing to consider SDI

not only as an incipient national defense system, but as a sort of bargaining chip.

### **SDI TODAY**

SDI is very different today from what it was in the beginning. In the United States a major issue has now become the question of funding. Can this program continue to grow as other federal expenses are reduced? Can SDI continue to grow when, as a consequence, limits must be placed on other types of expenditures in the Defense Department's budget? In addition to these economic questions, one must ask about the future of both the ABM Treaty and SALT accords.

Public opinion polls show that the United States' population is split on the SDI issue. The populace generally supports the idea of research, yet when asked whether they would still support the SDI program if it proves to violate existing treaties, people's opinions were split.

Among allies of the United States sentiments vary, but overall public sentiment is more uniformly opposed to the SDI program than it is within the United States. To be sure, in several Western European nations both the press and a number of prominent politicians and advisers have turned against the program quite strongly. At the same time, however, allied views on SDI have grown to be much more diverse than they were at the program's outset.

At first there was hesitation to accept SDI, and even outright opposition. Much of this opposition later evaporated. For example, at the NATO meeting in Csesme in April 1984 the current West German Defense Minister, Manfred Worner, expressed very strong reservations about the whole idea. Today he is one of the staunchest public defenders of the SDI program. Worner is only one of a number of former European skeptics who have turned into SDI supporters. There is therefore some basis for the claim of many United States officials that the SDI program is becoming a success. But before SDI can be characterized as either a success or a failure, it will be necessary to review how public debate over the program has evolved.

### **AN SDI SUCCESS**

SDI has indeed come a long way since President Reagan's speech in 1983. Recently, Lieutenant General Abrahamson acclaimed it a great success by citing its great technical advances in almost every field. It is impossible, of course, to discern whether this claim is valid or not. It may just have been a matter of a Reagan Administration spokesman presenting his case as forcefully as he could.

Aside from any technical merits, however, SDI was, and is, first and foremost a political program. And politically, at least, SDI has been a success, for it has not met with general rejection either in the United States or in Europe.

On the contrary, it has not only attracted attention from numerous strategists, it has shifted the entire strategic debate. It has attracted some degree of support from every major American ally, and has drawn the attention of its chief adversary, the Soviet Union. It is important to note that when the program was presented, it was uniformly opposed by all the allied nations. Today, however, the countries that have either signed or intend to sign government-to-government agreements with the United States on SDI comprise an impressive list: the United Kingdom, Portugal, Japan, Italy, West Germany and Israel. Furthermore, there

is now movement amongst several nations formerly opposed to SDI; this is the case of Belgium and also, to a certain degree, of France.

Many of the public reservations that these countries formerly expressed seem to have disappeared. For example, early in the debate British Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe called the SDI program "a new Maginot Line in space." Still, in spite of this, Great Britain has eagerly signed up for the SDI program. West Germany presents a similar case; despite intense debate between rival factions of the present coalition government, the end result has been an agreement between the Federal Republic and the United States. The future will undoubtedly bring more government-to-government agreements with the United States evincing greater support for the program.

Success has so far been relatively easy to achieve, though—SDI has not had to "deliver." There have been a few spectacular tests, many of which could probably have been conducted even without the SDI program. They have, in themselves, proved nothing. In the final analysis, however, the program's attraction for most of the countries aligning with the United States on the program seems to have nothing to do with SDI's technical defensive feasibility. Rather, the major attraction seems to be the program's potential for valuable technological spin-offs. But even here, the SDI program has not yet delivered, nor has it been forced to. No one knows to what extent the program will produce truly useful technological spin-offs. Indeed, this may never be known. The fundamental fact of the matter is that SDI's future is still very much up in the air.

#### **FAILURES OF SDI**

SDI has mobilized a great deal of opposition. Some have argued that SDI will increase problems on the conventional force level, that it represents a confrontational approach to the Soviet Union and that it can only lead to further arms buildups. Some have seen it as an illustration of the Reagan administration's contempt for arms negotiations and established political processes. (For a good exposition of this view, see S. Drell, P. Farley and D. Holloway, *The Reagan Strategic Defense Initiative: A Technical, Political and Arms Control Assessment* (1985)).

SDI has also met with some scorn in the press and in public opinion. From the start, it attracted the vaguely derisive nickname "Star Wars." Later attempts by the Reagan administration to influence the public to see SDI as a purely defensive measure largely failed.

The SDI program has also encountered difficulties among allies of the United States. Countries like Australia, Canada, Denmark, Holland, Norway and Spain have in various ways declined to participate in or to express approval of the program. Granted, most of these countries are "smaller" allies. But this represents one of the salient problems exacerbated by SDI: the growing split between the larger and smaller countries within the Western alliance.

Furthermore, SDI pits experts against experts. Every country in the Western alliance has experienced divisions of opinion within its scientific and military ranks over SDI's feasibility, desirability and usefulness.

SDI has other problems. It has the budget tide against it, for it is an exorbitantly expensive program. Present initiatives in the United States Congress towards a balanced budget work directly against SDI. Cuts have already begun

to appear. Time is against it. In a democracy, any long and stretched-out program inevitably encounters difficulties. It loses support; it loses momentum. Especially in the absence of any agreement over what SDI really is, fast and immediate results will undoubtedly be impossible to achieve. Finally, against this backdrop there currently rages a debate as to whether SDI comports with American treaty obligations and, if not, whether the United States should disregard those obligations.

Economic questions obviously loom large, for potential SDI funding from Congress and, indeed, from allied governments depends on the technological advances promised by the program. With this in mind, an evaluation of SDI's technological merits from the "outside" on the basis of unclassified information, presents the following two questions: First, will SDI technologies which scientists have developed in theory or in simulation actually work when integrated into full-scale complex weapon systems? Second, will these systems work effectively against a determined adversary using all its technological expertise?

Answers to these questions seem to lie some years in the future. So do these: If SDI systems were emplaced, could citizens of the Western nations ever be sure they would work as their governments intended? What political leader would dare disregard offensive threats by placing his or her faith in a man-made system subject to human fallibility?

These questions are not very different from the questions faced by the Western alliance today. The main difference is that today, even though no one can be certain of the reliability or capability of the West's many missiles, the same doubts apply equally to the East's weapons. Therefore, there exists a strong disincentive against either side using them. At the very least, the harm from such an exchange would surely outweigh any imaginable gains for an aggressor.

By the same logic, an argument based on stability can be constructed. This would rely on the premise that both superpowers switch from offensive to defensive weapons. By any account, however, this transition would require a lot more trust and detailed negotiation than can conceivably be mustered at the present.

### **THE FUTURE OF SDI**

What will happen, then, to the SDI program?

SDI will never materialize in any of its grand visions. This conclusion was reached by a panel of very diverse experts in a study published by the congressional Office of Technology Assessment.

Furthermore, the West is not about to discard deterrence as the fundamental principle of the alliance's defense. For not only the West's strategy, but also its relationship with the East depends upon it. But the debate which President Reagan has created by introducing SDI into world politics will probably inspire greater efforts by the Western alliance to conventionalize its arms and strategy. Perhaps this debate will even lend impetus to the push for nuclear-free zones in the allied nations, or to campaigns that demand that the United States forswear any first use of nuclear weapons.

Nonetheless, SDI can be counted on to continue as a weapons modernization and research program. It will also probably foster greater strategic technological control amongst the allies. A recent agreement between West Germany and the

United States heavily stresses the mutual control of technology. It plainly illustrates the concerns and the strategy of the United States government by trying to limit the transfer of potentially sensitive technology to the Soviet Union.

SDI will undoubtedly eventually produce more sophisticated weaponry. But all the talk about "Fortress America" or "Fortress Russia" is more appropriately regarded as sensational headlines than as actual prospects. Neither in economic, nor in political, nor in strategic terms can any of the superpowers by any means whatsoever isolate itself from the rest of the world.

SDI is therefore not nearly as dangerous as one side of the debate has tried to make it appear. It is, nevertheless, a major weapons program with considerable political backing and considerable political consequences. As such, it merits the full attention of all the citizens of the allied West.

