A Fresh Start for Arms Negotiations

Enthusiasm is high, but the prospects for an agreement may be dim without a cap on the "Star Wars" program

"An important reason for the Kremlin's support [for negotiations] was the prospect of an unwanted competition in ABMs. . . . They knew that American technology was and likely would remain superior to theirs."—From Doubletalk: The Story of SALT I, *by Gerard C. Smith.**

At the time of President Reagan's historic "Star Wars" announcement in March 1983, there was apparently little expectation within the Administration that it would profoundly affect relations with the Soviet Union. Several White House aides privy to drafts of the speech remember that they thought the statement would be exploited by the Soviets for short-term political gains, as evidence of Reagan's alleged hostility to a settled arms control agreement. But no one foresaw the depth of the Soviets' antipathy to the program or the persistence and emotional intensity of their public response.

Now, less than 2 years later, Reagan's proposal to develop a comprehensive missile defense has somehow become both a major stumbling block to smoother relations between the superpowers and the primary instrument that persuaded them to renew high-level contacts. With the announcement on 8 January that formal arms control negotiations "aimed at preventing an arms race in space and terminating it on earth" will get under way shortly, it is clear that the "Star Wars" proposal has generated unanticipated benefits as well as risks for its sponsor.

The process by which "Star Wars," or the Strategic Defense Initiative as it is formally known, came to assume center stage in U.S.–Soviet relations was a fairly speedy one. The idea for a large-scale missile defense program was put forward by the President himself, in the midst of a February 1983 conversation with the Joint Chiefs of Staff about the political and strategic vulnerabilities of the MX missile. Influenced partly by previous discussions with a variety of people, including physicist Edward Teller, Senator Malcolm Wallop (R–Wyo.), and industrialist Joseph Coors, and strongly encouraged on political and moral grounds by Admiral James Watkins, the chief of naval operations, Reagan decided to add the proposal to a speech on the 1984 defense budget. For nearly a week, knowledge of Reagan's plan was limited to supportive White House aides such as Robert McFarlane, then the deputy national security adviser; William Clark, his boss; science adviser George Keyworth, II; and Colonel Gilbert Rye, a director of space programs. Considerable opposition developed when the speech was circulated elsewhere within the Administration on the day before it was to be delivered, but Reagan turned aside a number of suggestions that it be watered down.

Wide World

Secretary of State George Shultz and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko point in different directions at a reception following discussions in Geneva on 7 January.

As expected, Soviet opposition was signaled within a few days of Reagan's speech, when Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov forecast that it would "open the floodgates to a runaway race of all types of strategic arms, both offensive and defensive." A few weeks later, the Soviets raised the ante by interrupting the ongoing arms negotiations in Geneva to accuse the United States of violating the 1972 SALT I treaty banning comprehensive ballistic missile defenses. "I got an earful of complaints" about the program, remembers one top U.S. negotiator.

Assurances by U.S. representatives that the "Star Wars" program was limited in scope subsequently were undercut by ambitious budgetary proposals, plans for early technology demonstrations, and harsh criticism of the 1972 treaty by such officials as Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who said last September that if "Star Wars" is successful the treaty would be broken. In August 1983, the Soviets reemphasized their position by submitting a treaty to the United Nations that would have barred the development of any future space-based weapons—a proposal that was widely thought to be aimed at the U.S. antisatellite program but which was undoubtedly motivated by Reagan's speech. The proposal failed to attract much attention in the United States, and some officials believe in retrospect that anxiety about the Administration's plans may have contributed to the Soviet's decision to quit the arms talks in December 1983, pleading a need to "review all problems under discussion."

Shortly before the election, the Soviets proposed new talks aimed only at setting an agenda for formal negotiations, but the proposal died in the wake of U.S.–Soviet squabbles over the wording of an announcement about them, and a Soviet pre-condition that antisatellite weapons tests be postponed while discussions were under way. In the agreement for new talks signed by Secretary of State George Shultz and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko several weeks ago, the Soviets dropped this precondition, as well as an earlier demand that new U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe be promptly withdrawn. In addition, they dropped a demand that limits on space weapons be considered in isolation, agreeing instead that the new talks could embrace "a complex of questions concerning space and nuclear arms, both strategic and intermediate range, with all the questions considered and resolved in their interrelationships." In return, the United States agreed only that the goal would be to prevent an arms race in

*Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1980.

space, reduce offensive arms, and strengthen global stability.

Clearly, the United States has gotten the better of the bargaining thus far, to the surprise of those scientific and technical experts who doubt that the President's proposal for a comprehensive defense is feasible. Why, they ask, should the Soviets become convulsed about an expensive idea that is doomed to failure? The answer, according to a number of experts on Soviet affairs, is twofold: First, having lost a continuing string of technological battles with the United States, the Soviets have enormous respect for U.S. scientific capabilities. Influenced in part by the sort of worst-case assessments common to military establishments in both countries, the Soviets apparently believe that a major U.S. research effort might well result in a breakthrough, or simply that no matter what the outcome, they are likely to be far behind. As one high-ranking Pentagon official says, "we would be only too happy to get them involved in this competition. Everybody knows that we have . . . more know-how in this area."

Second, more than most critics of the program in the United States, the Soviets have focused their attention on the more feasible, near-term goal of the program—the deployment of a system for the protection of military assets, not populations. They recognize that even though Reagan desires a defensive nuclear umbrella, those at the Defense Department charged with implementing his program are more interested in simple damage limitation. Stephen Meyer, a political scientist at MIT who directs a working group on Soviet military affairs, explains that "they have a much better picture of the details than popularly appears in the American press. The Soviet military also has a good idea" of how long it would take to deploy such a system. "But they are very optimistic," he says. "They think we could do it sooner if we really tried."

The reason that the Soviets are worried by this possibility was first enunciated in 1983, when Andropov said that it looks to them like "a bid to disarm the Soviet Union in the face of the U.S. nuclear threat," by sharply limiting the effectiveness of Soviet retaliation against a U.S. first strike. This argument was amplified last March, by a panel of Soviet scientists headed by R. Z. Sagdeyev, director of the Academy of Science's Institute of Space Research: Although "it cannot be regarded as an effective means of defense against a massive first strike," the panel said, "it may create illusions about possible defense against the retaliatory strike, the retribution, in which—it is believed—it would be difficult to take countermeasures against space-based anti-ballistic missiles."

Although the threat of a U.S. first strike may seem incredible to most Americans, it apparently seems real to the Soviets. "I believe that they sincerely see it as part of a first-strike strategy," Meyer says. "They look at [it] in the context of MX, Trident II, B-1, ALCM [cruise missiles], Stealth [bombers], and then Pershing II. . . . It's quite obvious to them that if you forget about intentions and worry only about capabilities then this is part of a first-strike strategy. I don't believe it's propaganda, because in fact you can find this in Soviet classified materials that are now available openly in the United States. . . . They may use it for propaganda, and they do a very good job of that, but I think they also believe it."

Reagan believes talk of "Star Wars" limitations is 5 to 10 years premature.

Since a parallel set of concerns was expressed by the Soviets at the outset of the SALT I negotiations, many analysts believe that the stage has been set for replay of those talks. For example, James Schlesinger, a Secretary of Defense under Presidents Nixon and Ford, said recently that "the only grand design for an arms control agreement in the 1980's is the same as in 1972, in which the Soviet's fear of American technology . . . makes them ready to agree to restraints on their offensive [nuclear] forces." Similarly, Gerard C. Smith, the chief U.S. negotiator in the SALT I talks, Robert McNamara, a Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and McGeorge Bundy, a national security adviser for the same presidents, have all forecast that discussion of such a trade-off will dominate the new negotiations.

There is a major difference between SALT I and forthcoming talks, however. Whereas President Nixon was willing to propose formal "limitations on ABM systems" within a week after talks began, Reagan believes that any discussion of "Star Wars" limitations is premature, due to continuing uncertainties about its technical feasibility. Only if the research bears fruit, he says, will the United States "be willing to go into negotiations and discussions with the other nations of the world and our allies about what to do about that and whether and how to deploy." Robert McFarlane, his national security adviser, has estimated that the earliest such negotiations might begin is 5 to 10 years from now, after Reagan leaves office. The deal Reagan apparently has in mind instead is one that covers intermediate- and long-range nuclear missiles, leaving the defense effort unscathed. At most, Administration sources say, he may be willing briefly to defer key "Star Wars" tests in exchange for a substantial permanent reduction in offensive Soviet arms.

Support for this position is not unanimous within the Administration, and some officials complain that it will hamstring U.S. negotiators and prevent any agreement. Schlesinger, Meyer, McNamara, Arnold Horelick of the RAND/UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet Behavior, and John Steinbruner, director of the foreign policy studies program at the Brookings Institution, also take this view. They point to remarks such as that made by Sagdeyev at a recent Planetary Soviet colloquium in Washington. "It is," he said, "plainly irrational to build up defensive systems and expect the other side to limit offensive weapons" that would be used to counter such systems. Similarly, Gromyko, speaking at a recent news conference, went so far as to suggest metaphorically that "the talks would be blown up" if the U.S. insists on such an agreement.

Those within the Administration who favor a "Star Wars" trade-off look to Paul Nitze to help sell it to the President. Nitze, an experienced and hard-headed adviser who has won the respect of conservatives, helped form a pro-ABM lobbying group as a private citizen in 1969, known as the Committee to Maintain a Prudent Defense Policy. Yet after his appointment to the SALT I delegation as a representative of the Defense Department, he toiled as hard as anyone to negotiate strict ABM limits.

Clearly, Reagan will be uninterested in any permanent "Star Wars" cap, such as a limit on space-based tests or deployment, unless the Soviets offer enormous concessions on offensive arms. Even then, some of his top advisers are skeptical that he will scrap a program that he has repeatedly described as "both militarily and morally necessary." The irony is that if the Soviets agreed to a massive reduction in offensive weapons, a "Star Wars" defense would have fewer targets to hit, and could probably be constructed more easily—yet no such reduction may be possible unless the defense itself is traded away.—**R. JEFFREY SMITH**