

Perspectives STRATEGIC DEFENSE CAN BE DANGEROUS

BY JAMES P. SCANLAN

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HOW FAR the Bush Administration will depart from the basic defense philosophies of its predecessor is likely to depend on the direction of the development of anti-missile technologies. In recent years, a consensus has emerged among the great majority of influential defense advisers that near-term implementation of the comprehensive nuclear shield envisioned by President Reagan as the Stra-

tegic Defense Initiative (SDI) is not a realistic goal. President Bush's first choice for Secretary of Defense, John Tower, expressed that view last January, and Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney appears to be of a similar mind.

There remains substantial support, however, for a less ambitious antimissile undertaking. Many have argued for continued large-scale funding of programs aimed at producing a system that can guard against a small number of accidentally launched (or terrorist launched) nuclear weapons, and/or that can protect land-based missiles and bombers from pre-emptive strikes.

The connection between those objectives and the concept that provided the original impetus—and justified the extravagant expenditures—for SDI is apparent from the suggestion that in the much longer term comprehensive, or almost comprehensive, strategic defense might be attained. In any case, the demonstration of a relationship between the development of more modest antimissile capabilities and an eventual development of the means of protecting populations from massive nuclear strikes may be necessary to guarantee the substantial sums that also will be required for the limited effort.

We therefore cannot dismiss as un-

necessary careful consideration of the implications of deploying a comprehensive system of strategic defense. After all, even those convinced of the impossibility of the nuclear shield originally envisioned by the proponents of SDI probably would hesitate to claim it is inconceivable that such a system could be operational in 100 years. And after accepting that it might be possible in 100 years, one could hardly deny the possibility of deployment in, say, 40 years.

But the fact that it will take x number of years to develop the complex system bears significantly on its dangers. For one thing, when our leaders assure the Soviets of the benign purposes of the defensive shield, they are merely speculating. The actual decisions as to its use will be made at a time when neither they nor practically anyone else now holding an influential position in this society will have anything to say on the matter. Thus, as the Soviets consider the prospect of a viable defensive system to be implemented several decades in the future, they must imagine not simply how it might be used by leaders truly interested only

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in removing the danger of nuclear catastrophe, but how it might be used by ideologues who at the relevant moment, or some subsequent date, could be in power.

That the system will involve costs previously undreamed of is, moreover, a good reason for the Soviets to expect that even humane and sensible leaders will use it offensively. For, while we may today assume that 40 years down the road, and at the expense of a few trillion dollars, we will have devised ways to deal with the countermeasures Soviet technology would then be capable of, it cannot seriously be doubted that in a year or at most several years after a comprehensive defensive system is deployed Soviet technology will develop a means of thwarting it. Whether we can then shore up the existing system in 10 months or 10 years at a cost of \$20 million or \$200 billion, or must develop an entirely new system, it is clear that regardless of the resources we devote to the effort we will never achieve more than relatively short periods of safety from the threat of Soviet nuclear missiles. This alone provides a strong incentive for using the system offensively immediately after we first establish it.

That incentive increases greatly when we take into account the danger from the Soviets during periods, however brief, that their technological advances have undermined our defensive system. Consider, for example, the situation where the Soviets secretly develop a way to surmount the United States' defensive system. Having done so, they would face a curious dilemma.

On one hand, it would be to their advantage to announce the achievement. Otherwise, they would continue to face the danger that the U.S., thinking itself invulnerable, will strike first. (The ability to counter the defensive system is of little benefit to the Soviet Union after the United States has launched a first strike.) On the other hand, once aware of the Soviet advance, the U.S. will proceed to counter it and eventually re-establish American invulnerability, leaving the Soviets again to devote scarce resources to overcoming our modifications. From the Soviet perspective, we

would have to presume, chancing a first strike while its technological advance remains secret might well seem preferable to a recurring scenario it can hardly afford.

Add to those considerations the fact that a space-based defensive shield would be immeasurably more effective when used in conjunction with an American first strike than when resisting a first strike from the Soviets. The case for offensive use of the shield then becomes compelling indeed, and would be no less so to humane and sensible leaders. If the survival of mankind is at stake, and the available options have long been limited to "lesser evils," humanitarian concerns themselves may be seen to support an offensive use of the nuclear shield.

IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, what would be the most reasonable course of action over the coming decades from where the men in the Kremlin sit? No doubt they recognize that, given the U.S.' technological superiority, the USSR cannot win a race to nuclear invulnerability without completely sinking its badly listing economy. The Soviet Union may also recognize—in contrast, apparently, to the United States—the dangers not so much of winning the race but of leading in it. The Kremlin leaders seem likely to decide, therefore, that their best—and perhaps the only available—strategy would be to concentrate on developing pre-emptive weapons. This would allow a reasonable prospect of successfully carrying out a first strike prior to the deployment of the United States' defensive system.

As the Soviets develop these weapons over the ensuing decades, they may feel less than fully confident that any first strike they might attempt ever would be completely successful. They may doubt, too, that the United States actually will manage to develop an effective defensive system, or use it offensively if it did. Still, like the United States, the Soviets must respond to dangers, not merely to certainties. Whatever the cost or peril, they will never permit themselves to be placed at the mercy of an invulnerable United States.