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A Potential Soviet Compromise on Ballistic Missile Defense

Hung P. Nguyen

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1. Enclosure (1) is forwarded as a matter of possible interest.
2. At the Baker-Shevardnadze meeting in Wyoming, the Soviets dropped their insistence that the U.S. say "no" to SDI as a precondition to a Soviet "yes" on START. This new Soviet position has been discounted, however, because of Shevardnadze's subsequent statement that each side retains the right to withdraw from START if the ABM treaty is violated. Thus, the Wyoming statements appear to be just a change in Soviet tactics, not in their longstanding objective of killing SDI.
3. Another interpretation is possible, however. The enclosed paper, produced prior to the Wyoming meeting, cites evidence for a fundamental shift in Soviet views on nuclear deterrence that would accommodate reductions in strategic offensive forces and negotiated deployment of strategic defensive systems. These ideas have been advanced by military and government officials in media controlled by party and government institutions. They represent, at the very least, a respectable vein of elite opinion; possibly they portend a true shift in Soviet views. The Wyoming statements could be another sign of this change.

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ABSTRACT

The body of this research memorandum was written before the Baker-Shevardnadze meeting in Wyoming. It presented evidence suggesting that the Soviet Union might agree to a compromise at the Wyoming meeting that defers the issue of ballistic missile defense (BMD) negotiations to a later stage in arms reductions, thus facilitating a first-stage cut in offensive arms without an explicit Soviet endorsement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Through this compromise, offensive arms reductions should first be delinked from an agreement on BMD, and then be relinked during the second stage of deeper cuts. Therefore, negotiations on limiting BMD systems, though deferred, are deemed "inevitable" if the U.S. persists in deploying a strategic defense system (SDS). Moreover, some Soviet arms controllers already look beyond the first stage to the prospect of negotiated transition into a strategic defense environment (i.e., a reliance on *defensive* deterrence). In this approach, Wyoming, then, was expected to be only a first move in the Soviet negotiating strategy for a grand compromise on strategic defense. As explained in the afterword added to the paper, the actual events at Wyoming seem consistent with that interpretation.



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INTRODUCTION¹

The official Soviet line up to now has emphasized a strict linkage between offensive arms reductions and continuing adherence to the ABM Treaty. This position is still being maintained by Soviet negotiators at the last round of the Geneva talks on nuclear and space weapons and by Marshal Akhromeev in his appearance before a congressional committee. Despite the long-standing Soviet insistence on this strict linkage, recent evidence indicates that the Soviets may agree to a compromise, if the U.S. persists with the option of deploying a strategic defense system (SDS).

The outline of a possible compromise can be described as follows: (1) both sides should agree to cut strategic nuclear weapons by 50 percent, while agreeing to disagree on the question of retaining or modifying the ABM Treaty; (2) however, subsequent negotiations on limiting ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems are deemed "inevitable" if the U.S. persists in deploying SDS. This potential compromise is emerging at a crucial stage, as the next round of the nuclear and space talks will resume shortly after the meeting in Wyoming between Baker and Shevardnadze in late September. On this upcoming meeting, *Pravda* recently stated that a "good chance" exists for a compromise solution that would move these talks forward.² An examination of this potential compromise, therefore, is highly relevant at this point. Moreover, the issue of how mutual adoption of BMD systems can be eventually accommodated within the framework of offensive arms reductions has also been raised. The guiding concept behind the adoption of these systems--defensive deterrence--is intended to replace the current concept of offensive deterrence, which is based on assured destruction.

It is important to keep in mind that these Soviet statements calling for a new approach to the talks on nuclear and space weapons all came from military and government officials in responsible positions, and so far have not been directly contradicted. What is more, most of their ideas were published in official media controlled by powerful party and government institutions, and at the very least, should be taken to represent a respectable vein of elite opinion. They may even constitute the first efforts, made with official backing, to inure the Soviet public to a momentous change of direction.

SAKHAROV'S COMPROMISE

Recent Soviet discussions show a growing realization that keeping the current Soviet preponderance in heavy missiles even under reductions, while prohibiting the deployment of ABM systems, is simply untenable. Soviet proponents of minimum deterrence now criticize the current structure of

1. The main text of this research memorandum was completed on 1 September 1989, three weeks before the Baker-Shevardnadze meeting in Wyoming. The afterword was added after the meeting.

2. *Pravda*, 16 August 1989, p. 1.

offensive forces as being conducive to the prosecution of a counterforce nuclear war, a condition that remains unchanged even with the 50-percent reductions under START.¹ Instead they proposed a transition to a minimum level of strategic nuclear forces, capable only of basic deterrence (i.e., the ability to inflict unacceptable damage on the other side's values). This scheme, in effect, offers to exchange current Soviet counterforce advantages for a U.S. decision to refrain from deployment of ABM systems. However, even its proponents realize that the U.S. is unlikely to agree to an exclusive reliance on *offensive* deterrence, even at a minimum level.

Therefore, in case the Soviet preference for an offense-only world cannot be maintained, there is evidence to suggest that the Soviet Union may agree to the prospect of a negotiated transition into a strategic defense environment (i.e., a reliance on *defensive* deterrence). However, this transition may not have to be negotiated immediately but can be achieved by stages. During the first stage, both sides would agree to a 50-percent reduction of offensive arms, without an explicit linkage to an agreement on SDI. If the U.S. persists with the option of deploying an SDS after the first stage, the Soviet Union will link further cuts to a negotiated adoption of BMD. In short, offensive arms reductions should be first delinked from an agreement on BMD and then relinked during the second stage. This compromise, first proposed by Andrei Sakharov in mid-1988,² was recently explicitly endorsed by two Soviet military officers as an alternative to the minimum deterrence scheme.³

Moreover, the second element of the "Sakharov compromise," the principle that both sides will eventually have to negotiate on BMD, has been endorsed in an article written for the authoritative party journal *Kommunist* and signed in press on 25 August 1988 by General-Major Lebedev, deputy chief of the Treaty and Legal Directorate of the Soviet General Staff, and his usual collaborator Podberezkin, a civilian think-tank analyst. The authors gave a strong hint that if a space-based SDS cannot be banned, the Soviet Union will be forced to eventually deploy an analogous system and both sides will "inevitably" have to negotiate on its limitation or reduction:

1. R. Bogdanov and A. Kortunov, "O balance sil," [On the balance of forces] *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, No. 7, 1989, p. 9 and G. Lednev, "Vozmozen li vyikhod iz iadernogo tupika," [Is an exit from the nuclear dead end possible?] *SShA*, No. 7, 1989, p. 7.

2. See Andrei Sakharov, "Neizbezhnost' perestroiki" [The inevitability of *perestroika*], in *Inogo ne dano* [There is no alternative], ed. by Iu. N. Afanas'ev (Moscow: Progress, 1988), pp. 132-133.

3. Cols V. Dvorkin and V. Torbin, "O real'noi dostatochnosti oborony" [On real defense sufficiency], *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 26, 25 June 1989, p. 6. Both authors are in active military service and hold degrees in technical sciences.

It is possible to predict without difficulty that to agree on banning the introduction into space of strike weapons is much simpler than later to agree on--and this is inevitable--their limitation or reduction.¹

This is, indeed, the first time any Soviet spokesman has accepted the principle of negotiating on limiting defensive systems, just as offensive systems have been limited and reduced by negotiations. The key concern here seems to be that deployment of an SDS, if it cannot be avoided, should be regulated by agreement and not allowed to develop into an unconstrained arms race.

DEFENSIVE DETERRENCE

Recent evidence also suggests that, after the first stage of the "Sakharov compromise," negotiations for ABM limitations may actually be preferable to the prohibition of ABM systems laid down in the 1972 Treaty. The first link in this chain of evidence comes from an article earlier this year by Ednan Agaev, a second secretary in the International Organizations Directorate of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, published in a journal controlled by the same ministry.² In brief, Agaev proposed an arms control model consisting of five main elements: (1) defensive deterrence, (2) survivability of offensive forces, (3) elimination of MIRVs, (4) greater accuracy of single-warhead systems, (5) a triad.

First, Agaev made it clear that his proposed concept of defensive deterrence signifies a resolute rejection of the outdated notion of offensive deterrence through the threat of inflicting unacceptable damage on the other side.³ According to Agaev, the idea of restructuring the armed forces so as to ensure the "irreversible erosion of the system of relations based on the theory of mutual assured destruction [i.e., the abolition of the theory of mutual assured destruction] is fully shared by the Soviet leadership [emphasis

1. Iu. Lebedev and A. Podberezkin, "Voennye doktriny i mezhdunarodnaia bezopasnost'" [Military Doctrines and International Security], *Kommunist*, No. 13, 1988, p. 114.

2. E.T. Agaev, "K novoi modeli strategicheskoi stabil'nosti" [Toward A New Model of Strategic Stability], *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, No. 2, 1989, Agaev is known to have worked on arms control issues at the Foreign Ministry before moving on to the International Organizations Directorate. Moreover, V. Petrovskii and another deputy foreign minister, V. Karpov, and two prominent scientists, E. Velikhov and R. Sagdeev, are members of the Council of the journal.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

added]."¹ Rather, basic deterrence should be maintained by building up a "powerful" BMD system in conjunction with radical reductions of offensive nuclear forces.

Second, offensive forces allowed to remain should be made highly survivable, through "the preferential development" of mobile ICBMs, the "maximum dispersal" of nuclear-missile forces, hardening of targets, and improvement of the command and control system to ensure "stable, invulnerable communications" with SSBNs.

Third, radical reductions of offensive weapons should be concentrated on "destabilizing" systems such as MIRVed ICBMs.² Agaev even went so far as to suggest that heavy MIRVed ICBMs should be "relinquished altogether," while "switching fully by agreement to single warhead systems, including those deployed on submarines [emphasis added]." The rationale for getting rid of MIRVs, according to Agaev, is that, in the theory of mutual assured destruction, MIRVed missiles are presented as a threat "not so much to military as civilian targets." A rejection of this theory, therefore, means that MIRVs have to be eliminated as well. Moreover, there is also the unstated fact that it is much easier to overcome a BMD system with MIRVs than with single warheads. The mutual adoption of mobile, single-warhead systems both on land and at sea means that, in the presence of a robust BMD system, nuclear attacks on values as well as on forces will be rendered ineffective.

Fourth, the accuracy of SLBMs should be improved. While Agaev did not explicitly explain the underlying reason for this arms control criterion, highly accurate systems would remain a potent instrument for a counterforce strike against third powers (i.e., those without a BMD system).

Fifth, strategic bombers would still be an essential element of the triad, with perhaps a third constantly in the air for greater security.

The bottom line of Agaev's scheme is that it would eliminate the incentives for any kind of nuclear attack, whether counterforce or countervalue, by one superpower against another. Against a third power, however, the scheme would retain extended deterrence through the option of a counterforce strike, while a BMD system would play the primary role in deterring a countervalue strike. The scheme would thus preserve the status of the Soviet Union as a superpower by separating the U.S. and

1. Ibid., p. 108.

2. Ibid., pp. 108-109.

the Soviet Union from the rest of the "nuclear club," an argument also used by Aleksandr Yakovlev, a Politburo member, to explain the underlying geopolitical rationale for a U.S. SDI.¹

Since the publication of Agaev's proposal, the idea of a mutual buildup of BMD systems, including space-based elements, to defend against limited nuclear attacks has also been endorsed by V.S. Etkin, Chief of the Applied Space Physics Department of the Space Research Institute under the Soviet Academy of Sciences.² According to Etkin, a space-based BMD system can serve as "a guarantee against accidental launches" or "missile launches by extremist groups." Such a limited defense system, including "ground and space positions for combat against unmassed missile launches," lies within the boundary of "conceivable technical solutions." Otherwise, stressed Etkin, "we will live under a constant fear of big and small extremists" (i.e., third powers or terrorists). Clearly, Etkin was addressing the question of negotiated limits on the deployment of BMD systems, especially since this issue is raised in conjunction with other cooperative measures to verify offensive arms reductions from space.

CONCLUSION

The evidence discussed so far suggests that the Soviet Union may change its current position and agree to a compromise that defers the issue of BMD negotiations to a later stage in arms reductions. The advantage of this compromise is that it would facilitate a first-stage cut in offensive arms without an explicit Soviet endorsement of SDI, thus giving the Soviets some room to negotiate during the even more critical second stage, when the effectiveness of a potential U.S. space-based SDS, and Soviet ability to compete within the relevant time frame, should become much clearer.

In that case, the focus of Soviet discussions may shift to the issue of how BMD can be eventually incorporated within the framework of offensive arms reductions. One Soviet arms control scheme, in particular, calls for a transition to highly accurate, mobile, single-warhead systems in conjunction with the creation of "powerful" BMD systems. Such a scheme in effect amounts to a political decision to abandon a strategic nuclear option against the U.S. while retaining the option of extended deterrence against third powers. Another alternative, of course, is to keep the present structure of offensive forces intact, even under reductions, while building up a BMD system.

1. Aleksandr Yakovlev, "Mezhimperialisticheskie protivorechiia--sovremennyi kontekst" [Interimperialist contradictions: the contemporary context], *Kommunist*, No. 17, November 1986, p. 12. Yakovlev is also chairman of the Central Committee Commission on International Policy.

2. V. Etkin, "Ot skrytnosti k doveriiu" [From secrecy to trust], *Pravda*, 10 July 1989.

This move would demand a far less disruptive restructuring of offensive nuclear forces, and yet have a far more ambiguous effect on the strategic nuclear balance.

AFTERWORD

At the Wyoming meeting, the Soviet side introduced a new proposal to delink the 50-percent cut in offensive arms from "an agreement on defense and space."¹ In addition, within the Joint Statement, this "delinkage" is reinforced by the removal of the Soviet insistence on the obligation not to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. The Joint Statement then goes on to say that both sides should "continue at the same time to discuss ways to ensure predictability in the development of the Soviet-American strategic relationship." By withdrawing their demand that both sides must adhere to the ABM Treaty for a fixed period, the Soviets have, therefore, evidently created an "opening" for testing and deployment of BMD systems, provided that such development proceeds within the context of a mutual commitment to maintain "predictability" in the strategic relationship. It is this apparent opening that has received little attention in the aftermath of Wyoming.

Instead much emphasis has been placed on the condition, expressed outside the Joint Statement, that each side retains the "right to withdraw" from the new strategic arms reduction treaty if the other side "violates" the ABM Treaty.² It is this condition that has generated uncertainty about the significance and implications of the Soviet delinking proposal. The more pessimistic view tends to characterize the Soviet condition at best as a way to reassert the linkage down the road, and at worst, as a ploy to hold SDI hostage and exert political pressures on the U.S. to kill the program. Such pressures may be hard to resist if the U.S. is portrayed either as preventing the finalization of a START agreement or "forcing" the Soviets to cease arms reductions because of U.S. commitment to testing and deployment of SDS. In short, the Soviets give a concession on one hand only to take it away with the other.

In raising the possibility that the Soviets may actually be setting up the U.S. for an "ambush" further down the road, the pessimistic view in effect questions the good faith of the Soviet approach. If correct, this view hardly bodes well for a propitious beginning, if the Soviets are serious about laying a long-term foundation for cooperation. Moreover, this view ignores the important fact that the opening is incorporated into the Joint Statement, while the condition is not. This means that they are not of equal standing in terms of subsequent negotiations and are probably intended for different purposes.

1. Joint Statement by Baker and Shevardnadze in *Pravda*, 25 September 1989, p. 5. Soviet acceptance of the term "agreement on defense and space" is in itself remarkable, as the Soviets have consistently depicted SDI as a program to create "space-strike weapons."

2. Statement by Shevardnadze at news conference in Wyoming, *Pravda*, 25 September 1989, p. 6.

Equally, and probably more plausible than the pessimistic view is the more optimistic assessment that the condition is intended to ensure predictability to the opening toward strategic defense. In other words, the threat to withdraw from a START treaty if the ABM Treaty is violated can be used as a bargaining chip to get the U.S. to talk on allowable testing of BMD systems. From the Soviet point of view, knowing in advance the parameters of BMD systems to be deployed would go a long way toward ensuring predictability. The condition thus gives the Soviets some leverage for restraining and regulating the pace and scope of the SDI program.

All in all, the Soviet approach is to facilitate a first-stage cut in offensive arms without an explicit Soviet endorsement of SDI, deferring the issue of BMD negotiations to a later stage. However, the result emerging from Wyoming thus far has allowed for two different interpretations of the Soviet delinking proposal. One way to probe Soviet intentions--and it may be preferable to do this sooner rather than later--is to find out if the Soviets would drop the condition in exchange for U.S. willingness to talk on allowable testing of ground- and space-based BMD systems. If so, acceptance of this proposal would be a clear indication that the Soviet Union no longer rejects strategic defense in principle, insisting only that testing and deployment is conducted with a view toward preserving predictability. From this perspective, Wyoming, then, is only a first move in the Soviet negotiating strategy for a grand compromise on strategic defense.