Centre for International Relations Occasional Paper no. 17

THE SOVIET UNION, SDI, AND THE SINO-SOVIET-AMERICAN STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

Paul Marantz

Department of Political Science

University of British Columbia

Vancouver, British Columbia

April 1987

An earlier version of this paper was presented to a conference on "The Strategic Defense Initiative: Implications for the Asian Community," Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, Seoul, Korea, 29-31 July 1986.

The Soviet Union, SDI, and the Sino-Soviet-American Strategic Triangle

by Paul Marantz

Introduction

There are many factors that impinge upon East-West relations, but clearly one of the most important continues to be the controversy and uncertainty surrounding ballistic missile defence (BMD). In this paper, I shall examine this controversial issue, focussing upon three aspects in particular: Soviet perspectives on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI); the possible impact that SDI might have on Soviet-American relations; and, on a more indirect note, the effect that changes in Sino-Soviet relations might have on ties between China and the United States. Because Western security is so conditioned by the dynamics of the Sino-Soviet-American strategic triangle, the future geopolitical consequences of SDI for that trilateral relationship warrant careful consideration, even though they remain uncertain and highly conjectural.

At first glance, it may not be immediately apparent why the Soviet leadership is so upset by SDI--or indeed whether Soviet anxiety is genuine or merely feigned so as to achieve ulterior political goals. After all, Soviet spokesmen have repeatedly insisted that SDI is a fantasy, which would not work and would be vulnerable to a wide range of comparatively inexpensive counter-measures that would render it ineffective. Moreover, the Soviet Union has long advocated the virtues and importance of defence and has been in the forefront of efforts to create an effective defence not just against an air-borne threat but against missiles as well.

The Soviet Union has devoted far more effort than the United States to civil defence, and it has the world's most elaborate air-defence system. Primitive BMD systems were deployed around Moscow and Leningrad by the mid-1960s, and in the period since the signing of the ABM Treaty in 1972 the Soviet Union has continued to upgrade the capabilities of the Moscow system.[1] For all these reasons, it is tempting to dismiss pious Soviet pronouncements denouncing the "militarization of space" and the development of "space-strike weapons" as self-serving and manipulative propaganda meant to blacken the image of the United States and exacerbate tensions within the NATO alliance.

Without doubt, tactical and propagandistic considerations have played a major role in shaping the Soviet stance toward SDI. With the embarrassing failure of Soviet attempts to use the intermediate-range nuclear force (INF) issue to sow dissension within the Western alliance, a new rallying call was sought--and found in President Reagan's March 1983 speech on behalf of SDI, which proved a boon to Soviet propagandists. Until very recently, every effort was made to portray the President as a trigger-happy gunslinger itching for a nuclear showdown. Supposed American intransigence over SDI was depicted as the central obstacle to the kind of far-reaching progress on arms control for which people everywhere yearn; at no time was this more apparent than after last autumn's summit in Reykjavik.

Despite these transparent political motives, I shall argue nonetheless that the Soviet leadership is indeed deeply concerned about SDI, which represents a fundamental challenge to basic Soviet interests. As such, it is bound to influence all aspects of Soviet policy. In the long term, the dynamics of the Sino-Soviet-American strategic triangle are sure to be affected by it, as will all the major components of Soviet domestic and foreign policy.

The Soviet Union and SDI

Publicly, Soviet spokesmen insist SDI cannot possibly work; they have pointed to the complex technical problems and the vulnerability of SDI to Soviet counter-measures. However, there is good reason for believing that this public posture of self-confidence and equanimity conceals deep misgivings about the dynamism and inventiveness of American technology. From the earliest days of the Bolshevik regime, the Soviet leadership has had a very great--often even unrealistic--respect for the prowess of American science and technology. This was as true of Khrushchev and Brezhnev as it was of Lenin and Stalin. For example, one of the important factors motivating the Soviet pursuit of détente in the early 1970s was the belief that a vast increase in the utilization of Western--and especially American--technology would enable the Soviet Union to reinvigorate its economy and solve its growing economic problems.

Throughout the post-World War II period, the Soviet leadership has been forcefully reminded of the vigor of American military technology. Time and again, Moscow found that while it might be able to gain an initial advantage in a particular area if American efforts were directed elsewhere, once this area was identified as a priority by U.S. policy-makers, the Soviet Union would soon be out-distanced and, indeed, left far behind. The Soviet Union successfully launched the world's first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in 1957, yet within a few years the United States had established overwhelming superiority in this area. (The Soviet Union was able to obtain parity fifteen years later only because of the unilateral decision of U.S. policy-makers to slow the pace of the American buildup). Similarly, in the mid-1960s, American lack of interest in BMD allowed the Soviet Union to forge ahead in missile defence; but by the

early 1970s, Moscow had to accept the unpleasant fact that American technology had become superior to its own in this domain as well.

It is on the basis of such experience that Stephen M. Meyer, a specialist on Soviet military technology, concludes:

> Soviet experience with American technological power, for example, is likely to bias internal military and scientific assessments of the U.S. SDI towards an assumption of feasibility--in contrast to the judgment of infeasibility voiced by Western SDI critics and Soviet scientists who have contacts in the west .... For the Soviet leadership, post-war experience is clear: the technical and economic resources of the U.S., when harnessed by governmental calls for action, can turn what seems like science fiction into technological fact.[2]

Soviet military planners, no less than their Western counterparts, have a tendency--and indeed a professional responsibility--to engage in worst-case analysis. The probability of a premeditated Soviet first strike aimed at disarming American ICBMs may be very low, but it is a contingency that still must be considered in U.S. planning. By the same token, even if Soviet analysts believe that the probability of SDI succeeding is small, they must still plan for this remote possibility. In this sense, one does not have to be paranoid to have worst-case nightmares.

When Soviet military planners contemplate various worst-case nightmares, there is a real concern that at some point in the future the United States might achieve--or at least believe that it had achieved--a potentially useable first-strike capability against the Soviet Union. While some American commentators view SDI in regal isolation from other strategic developments and see it purely as a means of obtaining a defensive capacity to protect American population centres, Soviet commentators invariably link SDI with the current or potential American buildup of such offensive capabilities as MX, Midgetman, the Trident D-5, the B-1, Stealth bombers, cruise missiles, and the Pershing II.[3]

Americans may have a benign view of their own policies and intentions, but is it really reasonable to expect Soviet policy-makers--especially those engaged in military policy--to share it? It is strange that often those analysts who have the bleakest view of Soviet intentions (seeing them as heavily influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology and as aimed at the establishment of world communism) often assume that Soviet perceptions are clear, unbiased, and largely unclouded by ideological distortions. It is assumed that the Soviet leadership views American goals in much the same way that American decision-makers do, and hence that the Soviets realize that American policy is defensive, largely reactive, and not out to threaten the foundations of Soviet security. In contrast, I would argue that such factors as historical experience, the impact of ideology, and the authoritarian and secretive nature of the Soviet political system do in fact very much colour Soviet perceptions and expectations. Deeply ingrained negative images of American policy heighten Soviet concern about the potential consequences of a U.S. lead in defensive technology, and often cause the Soviet leadership to assume the worst about American intentions.

If one area of Soviet concern centres on the potential military consequences of an American advantage in SDI-related technology, another relates to its political ramifications. Even if SDI is not a complete success (in the sense of providing a leak-proof shield for American cities), the Soviets fear that it still may be enough of a success in the eyes of American decision-makers to embolden them to seize the initiative and launch a broad geopolitical offensive against the Soviet Union. The Soviets have concluded that what matters is not so much how they appraise the potential effectiveness of SDI, but what the Americans--with their great confidence that a "technological fix" exists for all

problems--believe. If the Americans come to believe that through SDI they have achieved "escalation dominance" and the ability to "prevail" in a nuclear war, the Soviets fear that they are likely to try to translate this newly gained advantage into direct and substantial gains in the on-going East-West competition.

For the first quarter-century of the nuclear era, the United States had decisive nuclear superiority. While many in the West would argue that American policy can be faulted for having been too passive and for not having made greater political use of this superiority, the view from Moscow is very different. From the Soviet perspective, Washington has repeatedly attempted to deal with Moscow from a "position of strength" and has actively tried to thwart the Soviet Union's pursuit of its legitimate aspirations. One of the major goals of the prolonged and expensive Soviet military buildup throughout the 1960s and 1970s was to remove this constraint and to deprive the United States of any political advantages it might possess by virtue of its nuclear predominance.

Soviet leaders have long sought global superpower status. They crave recognition as a genuine equal of the United States and believe that their country is entitled to all the prerogatives of worldwide influence and power that they ascribe to the United States. Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko provided a revealing indication of official thinking in his June 1968 speech to the Supreme Soviet when he declared:

> The Soviet people do not have to beg for the right to have a say in settling any question involving the maintenance of international peace, the freedom and independence of the peoples, and our country's broad interests. The right is ours by virtue of the Soviet Union's position as a great power.[4]

The achievement of this status was one of the key factors motivating the Soviet pursuit of détente in the early 1970s. The first SALT agreement was

valued by the Soviets not merely because of its impact on the arms race, but because it was thought to signify a new recognition by Washington of Soviet-American political parity. Other agreements, such as the 1972 one on "Basic Principles of Relations," were valued for much the same reason.[5] In this context, SDI is viewed as a direct attack on the Soviet Union's hard-won status. As one Soviet official angrily told an American correspondent:

> He [President Reagan] is trying to tell us that the Soviet Union cannot be a superpower. He is trying to beat us down, to damage us politically and economically, after we have worked so hard to establish equality. We can't let him get away with that, and we won't.[6]

SDI has been seen as nothing less than a premeditated plot to destroy any possibility of rebuilding Soviet-American détente, by deepening anti-Soviet sentiment in the United States and by undermining the strategic foundations for arms control. In short, in Soviet eyes SDI represents an attempt to turn the clock back to the 1950s and to relegate Moscow once again to an inferior position in world affairs. Thus, for the Soviet leadership, the potential political implications of SDI are no less menacing than its military significance.

A third area of Soviet concern is the economic impact of SDI. The Soviet economy is far from robust. Since the mid-1970s, there has been a sharp decline in growth rates. Although there has been a partial rebound from the low point in 1979 (when the GNP grew at 0.2 percent), the current level of approximately 2 to 3 percent is far from satisfactory.[7] The Soviet economy is bedeviled by a leveling off of oil production, a sharp increase in the costs of energy production, a lack of technological innovation, inefficient management, and low worker morale (which is reflected in the high levels of alcohol abuse). To be sure, Mikhail Gorbachev has made the economy his number one priority, but fundamental change will not be easily or quickly achieved.

The share of the Soviet GNP devoted to the military is already more than twice that of the United States--and this in a total GNP only about half that of the U.S. If an increased share of the GNP were to be devoted to the military, cuts would have to be made in either investment or consumption. The selection of either of these options would impose significant costs. A reduction in investment allocations would hinder economic growth and the modernization of the economy, while a decrease in the level of consumption would lower worker morale (and hence productivity) and possibly generate political instability, creating a risk that, in the aftermath of the unrest in Poland, the Soviet leadership is disinclined to take.

If SDI leads to an unrestrained arms race in defensive and offensive technology, the costs will be truly enormous. Research into the various exotic technologies for defence will cost many billions of rubles, as will the search for counter-measures to thwart a defensive system. Indeed, there is some concern in the Soviet Union that part of the hidden agenda associated with SDI is to intensify the economic burdens under which the Soviet Union labours so as to weaken the Soviet economy and compel Moscow to acknowledge its inability to compete with the United States.

These, then, are the Soviet Union's major fears about SDI, but there are other anxieties as well. The Soviet Union is also concerned that the research associated with SDI will lead to technological advances applicable to such conventional options as direct military use of lasers, advances in sensors, and the improvement of precision-guided "smart bombs." It is important to the Soviet Union to prevent the United States from gaining a dominant advantage in these areas.

A final Soviet concern to be noted is the potential effect of SDI on nuclear proliferation. If superpower arms control were to break down, it would be that much harder to discourage potential nuclear powers from acquiring nuclear weapons. The link between superpower arms control and non-proliferation is explicitly acknowledged in Article VI of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, which obliges the principal nuclear powers "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament."[8] If an active arms race in defensive technology leads to the abrogation of the ABM Treaty and the final collapse of SALT, this would certainly weaken the constraints on the non-nuclear powers.

In this regard, the Soviet Union would be especially concerned about the West German reaction. The Soviet Union was greatly reassured by the West German signing of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1969, and this may even have been a significant factor in its willingness to accept the limitations of the 1972 ABM Treaty. The possibility, however remote, that West Germany might be spurred to acquire its own nuclear forces is not something that the Soviet leadership would contemplate with equanimity.

SDI and Soviet-American Relations

The Soviet Union confronts two broad options in dealing with SDI. One option would be to attempt to mobilize political pressures within the West against SDI by combining an intense propaganda campaign with the carefully calibrated heightening of international tension (so as to underscore the supposed link between SDI and an increased risk of war). Essentially, this would involve employing again the approach that was utilized in Moscow's unsuccessful attempt to block INF deployment in 1983.

Whereas this option involves the mobilization of pressure against the American Administration, in an attempt at constraining it and preventing its pursuit of SDI, the second option would involve a policy of cooperation with Washington in an effort to negotiate a new arms control regime that might encompass both SDI and offensive weapons. With this approach, the use of the SDI issue for propagandistic purposes would certainly not disappear, but it would be subordinated to the goal of productive cooperation.

The Soviet Union's ultimate choice will be heavily influenced by the leadership's perceptions of the American political system and by its sense of the Soviet ability to compete in the area of defensive technology. An ideal solution from the Soviet viewpoint would be one in which the United States unilaterally cut back its SDI program while research within the Soviet Union continued in secrecy, largely unhindered. The Soviet Union could attempt to encourage this development by taking advantage of the fear of war within the American electorate, by encouraging scepticism about SDI within Congress, by trying to stimulate the peace movement in North America and Western Europe, and by playing upon European anxieties and exacerbating existing tensions within NATO. Such an approach might be coupled with a significant shift in Soviet policy away from the pre-occupation with Soviet-American relations that has characterized the past fifteen years and toward a greater concern with Western Europe and Japan. Some Western observers feel that recent personnel changes, including the replacement of Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who was closely associated with a U.S.-oriented policy, may be related to Soviet interest in the European option.[9]

Advocates of this option within the Kremlin could argue that the Soviet Union need not panic and rush to trade away the strategic gains of the

Brezhnev era, since there is still ample time to meet the challenge of SDI. The deployment of SDI is at least several years away. In the meantime, a new American President will come to office in January 1989, and doubts about SDI are growing not just in Congress but in the Pentagon as well (where it is seen by some as draining money away from higher priority projects). The American economy, no less than that of the Soviet Union, is already experiencing severe strain; and any further weakening of it would be bound to intensify growing concerns about the mammoth costs associated with SDI. Thus, proponents of this option might argue that the Soviet Union should focus its energies on Western Europe and allow a controlled deterioration of Soviet-American relations to take place (e.g., refusing to countenance any further Gorbachev-Reagan summit meetings) as a means of underscoring the argument that the American pursuit of SDI is the central obstacle to the removal of the threat of nuclear war.

In contrast, the second option available to the Soviet Union would involve a very different policy. Instead of stoking tensions, the Soviet Union might engage in businesslike negotiations and attempt to cut a deal. For example, the Soviet Union might agree to major reductions in the number of offensive weapons in return for a strengthening of the ABM Treaty, a ban on all but laboratory research, and a mutual commitment to abide by the ABM Treaty for an extended period of time (such as the fifteen years proposed by the Soviets in June 1986). There are some who argue that the apparent decision to embrace the "zero option" on INF is a prelude to such an approach.

Although in the past the idea of using weapons systems as bargaining chips has not been terribly effective (and has even added fuel to the arms race), there is one success story that is very relevant to SDI. By being willing to conclude an agreement at just the right time, when Soviet apprehension over

U.S. BMD capabilities was high and the dwindling support for the Safeguard system not yet fully evident, the United States was able to restrict Soviet deployment of its ABMs to just two sites (and later one) in return for similar restrictions of an American BMD system which was unilaterally dismantled in 1976. One factor that works against Moscow's adoption of this second option is that it is by no means clear that the current U.S. Administration is willing to use limitations on SDI as an arms-control bargaining chip. While there are apparently some differences of opinion among senior Administration officials, President Reagan appears firmly committed to avoiding any limitations that might stand in the way of the development of SDI.

More fundamentally, it would appear that the United States and the Soviet Union are, to use the apt words of Marshall Shulman, "out of sync with each other" in their present approach to Soviet-American relations.[10] While the United States is rebounding from the multiple humiliations of the 1970s (Watergate, Vietnam, Iran, Afghanistan) and has entered a period of national self-assertion in which support for arms control has greatly diminished, the Soviet Union, under new leadership, seems to be cautiously recognizing the need for a less intransigent foreign policy and is manifesting an increased interest in arms control.

The ferment that Gorbachev has brought to the Soviet Union should not be exaggerated. The changes thus far in both domestic and foreign policy have been quite modest. Indeed, the revamping of Soviet foreign policy in the first year following Stalin's death far exceeded anything that Gorbachev has accomplished to date. Nonetheless, there are harbingers of change that could herald more substantial reforms given the appropriate internal and external conditions.[11]

Gorbachev has moved more quickly than anyone expected to bring new personnel into the top Kremlin foreign-policymaking circles.[12] After 28 years as Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko was unexpectedly kicked upstairs (to the ceremonial post of Head of State). Gromyko was replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, who, much like Khrushchev in 1953, had no previous association with Soviet foreign policy and hence no direct personal stake in continuing it unchanged. Recognizing the need for greater expertise about the West (and about North America in particular), Gorbachev brought two foreign policy experts into the all-important Secretariat. Anatoly Dobrynin, long-time Soviet Ambassador to the United States, replaced the veteran Boris Ponomarev as head of the International Department; and Aleksandr Yakovlev, who served for a decade as the Soviet Ambassador to Canada, became an important adviser and Head of the Department of Propaganda. Never before have two officials with such long-term experience living in North America served at the same time within the Secretariat.

While Gorbachev has been vocal in his criticism of the state of the Soviet economy, he has followed past practice and been far more circumspect in discussing foreign policy. However, reading between the lines, one can see signs of the beginnings of a cautious re-examination of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. In his February 1986 speech to the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, Gorbachev stated:

> The situation has reached a turning point not just in domestic affairs. This is also characteristic of <u>foreign</u> affairs. Changes in present-day world development are so profound and significant that they require the reinterpretation and comprehensive analysis of all its factors. The situation of nuclear confrontation makes necessary new approaches, methods and forms of relationships among different social systems, states and regions.[13]

In another passage he similarly declared: "Continuity in foreign policy has nothing in common with the simple repetition of what has been done in the past, especially in approaches to accumulated problems."[14] Significantly, the revised version of the authoritative Party Program, published some months earlier in October 1985, contained a major reassessment of the Third World and appeared far less optimistic than earlier Soviet appraisals.[15] There is also evidence that the Soviet Union's foreign policy was carefully scrutinized at an unusual meeting of top foreign policymakers and key Soviet ambassadors, convened in May 1986 and addressed by Gorbachev. Although Gorbachev's speech to this meeting has not been published, the fact that Tass reported that "the experience of Soviet diplomacy in recent years was examined critically and with party-style exactingness" suggests that past policies were found wanting.[16]

In short, recent Soviet arms proposals and other Soviet actions point to the possibility of somewhat greater flexibility on Moscow's part and suggest a possible willingness to negotiate seriously to improve Soviet-American relations. Whether conditions within the Soviet Union or the response of the United States will be supportive of this tendency remains to be seen. Soviet-American relations are poised at a very unstable point. Both a significant improvement and a marked deterioration are fully possible.

SDI and Sino-Soviet Relations

From the perspective of Washington, the heyday of the Sino-Soviet-American strategic triangle was in the early 1970s. At that time, the U.S. clearly occupied the "swing" position in the triangle, having far better relations with the Soviet Union and China than either of those two had with the other.[17] Sino-Soviet relations were almost non-existent, as the two countries

precariously perched at the brink of war; by contrast, Sino-American and Soviet-American relations were improving with great rapidity. Both the Soviet Union and China were desperate to ensure that the United States did not take sides against them in the event of Sino-Soviet hostilities.

Clearly, a great deal has changed over the past decade and a half. The shape of the strategic triangle has been altered as major transformations have occurred in each of its legs. Soviet-American relations have plunged from the euphoric (and unrealistic) heights of détente to the low of a new quasi-cold war. Hopes for a Sino-American strategic alliance have not been realized; recalcitrant trouble spots in the relations between the United States and China have become more salient (e.g., Taiwan, trade disputes, political and ideological differences); and China has moved toward a more independent foreign policy and distanced itself from the United States.

Moreover, starting in the early 1980s Sino-Soviet relations began to thaw quite considerably. If in 1969-70 China and the Soviet Union stood at the very brink of war, they have now managed to achieve a significant--though still incomplete--normalization of relations.[18] High-level negotiations have been continuing on a regular basis since their resumption in the autumn of 1982, after a three-year break initiated by the Chinese in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Chinese insistence on Soviet concessions in regard to the so-called "three obstacles" (Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Soviet support for Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea, and Soviet troop deployments along the Sino-Soviet border) has not prevented a major expansion of economic and cultural contacts between the two countries. In steps reminiscent of the Sino-American ping-pong diplomacy of the previous decade, the Soviet Union and China began their

cautious diplomatic ballet with an exchange of visits by a broad range of cultural and sports personnel, academics, and officials. The visit of Ivan Arkhipov to Beijing in December 1984 is indicative of the progress achieved on this front. As First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers (i.e., Deputy Premier), Arkhipov is the highest-ranking Soviet official to visit China since Premier Kosygin's brief stopover at the Beijing airport fifteen years earlier.

There has also been a major expansion in Sino-Soviet trade. Bilateral trade amounted to approximately $1.9 billion in 1985, an amount which constitutes a 50% increase over 1984 and a dramatic change from the almost non-existent levels of the 1970s. In July 1985, the two countries agreed to a further expansion of trade and set the trade target for 1990 at over $3 billion. (This would still be significantly less than the present level of Sino-American trade, which in 1985 was valued at approximately $8 billion.)[19]

A number of agreements have also been signed to promote scientific, technological, and economic cooperation. The Soviet Union has agreed to assist China in the modernization of her industry, and for the first time since the 1960 break, Soviet technicians have returned to China in significant numbers to assist with the overhauling of the factories built with Soviet assistance back in the 1950s. This progress in economic relations has been accompanied by a reduction in press polemics and by a willingness of each side to acknowledge that for all their differences, this is a dispute between two "socialist" nations.[20]

The abnormal severing of ties between the Soviet Union and China that occurred in the 1970s has been reversed. But despite this change, the two countries have thus far made little progress on the main political issues dividing them. Each remains fearful and suspicious of the other. China continues to

spurn the long-standing Soviet offer of a mutual non-aggression pact.[21] The Chinese leadership has also refused to re-establish Party ties, and no Chinese delegation was sent to Moscow for the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in February 1986.

But what of the future? Might this partial normalization of relations and limited accommodation lead to a broader accommodation or new alliance, especially given the impact that SDI could have on Soviet-American relations? Although the political consequences of SDI are difficult to predict (due to the many technical uncertainties and the long time horizon projected), there is a broad consensus among expert observers of Sino-Soviet relations that, as Donald Zagoria has put it, "a far-reaching accommodation between the two adversaries is hardly conceivable."[22] The forces and factors promoting reconciliation are far weaker than those stimulating continued mistrust and suspicion. Before turning to a specific discussion of how SDI might affect the future of Sino-Soviet relations, it is necessary to note briefly the most important of these obstacles to improved relations, so as to get a sense of just how difficult it will be for these two nations to move beyond their present limited accommodation--no matter what changes SDI might bring to the international system of the 1990s and beyond.

The most significant barrier to a far-reaching improvement in Sino-Soviet relations is the clash between the conflicting national interests and security goals of the two countries. China aims at eventually becoming a true global power, a development that the Soviet leadership is determined to prevent or delay. Similarly, the Soviet Union strives for a continued expansion of its influence and power, not just in Asia but on a worldwide basis, and the Chinese feel equally threatened by this aspiration and are just as determined to resist

it. Chinese demands for a Soviet retreat from Afghanistan and Vietnam are just one symptom of their clashing national interests. The Chinese interest in forging closer ties with Japan and in encouraging a healthy Japanese-American security relationship, as well as a continued American presence in Asia (as a counterweight to the Soviets), are further instances of the clash.

Objective factors are reinforced by subjective ones, as fear and suspicion exacerbate the rivalry. The Sino-Soviet dispute, much like the cold war between the East and West, has taken on a life of its own in the attitudes and perceptions of both sides. The Sino-Soviet cold war will be no less difficult to terminate than the East-West one.

In the Soviet Union, there is a pervasive fear and dislike of China which often has racial overtones. The Mongol occupation of Russia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries left a lingering legacy of mistrust, which has been reinforced by the selective Soviet perception of more recent events. The Chinese are seen as ingrates who are unappreciative of all the Soviet assistance given to them and who have consistently attempted to embroil the Soviet Union in a conflict with the United States. For their part, the Chinese are acutely conscious of the way in which the Soviet leadership tried to take advantage of their past weakness, has attempted to gain control over the Chinese Communist Party ever since the 1920s, and has repeatedly sacrificed Chinese national interests to the pursuit of Soviet objectives. Neither side has much expectation that the other really will or can change its basic mode of behaviour.

Lastly, relations between Moscow and Beijing are complicated by the dynamics of the Sino-Soviet-American strategic triangle. China is unwilling to jeopardize its American connection (which provides invaluable economic and political benefits) by too close an association with the Soviet Union; and the

Soviets are fearful that the Chinese are more interested in using them to extract concessions from the Americans than in really bringing about a lasting improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. Added to the other factors already mentioned, this produces an additional element of caution and suspicion.

Yet these obstacles to a rapprochement obviously constitute only one half of the ledger of Sino-Soviet relations. Significant incentives for improving their relations also exist. A broader accommodation between the Soviet Union and China would allow both countries to reduce the sizeable economic burden of their armed confrontation and to increase the pace of the economic modernization programs upon which they have embarked. Increased levels of trade are desirable for the same reason.

Improved relations would also further reduce the risks of accidental war, improve the badly battered image of International Communism, and enhance the attractiveness of Marxism-Leninism in the Third World. Every Soviet leader since Stalin has sought--but failed to achieve--a lasting improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. If Gorbachev were to achieve this elusive goal, it would greatly enhance his stature within the Soviet leadership. Gorbachev's Chinese counterpart would reap similar benefits, and in the context of a post-Deng Xiaoping succession, this option might prove attractive to a new Chinese leader.

At the present time, the obstacles to a Sino-Soviet rapprochement are clearly more formidable than the incentives for such a fundamental diplomatic realignment. However, if SDI were to lead to a dramatic acceleration of the arms race and the collapse of Soviet-American relations, might this sufficiently alter the strategic equation so as to produce a transformation in Sino-Soviet relations? In theory, a major deterioration of relations along one leg of the strategic triangle should encourage closer relations along the other two legs.

For example, the heightening of Sino-Soviet tensions in 1969 and 1970 produced a warming of American relations with both China and the Soviet Union. Similarly, the cooling of Soviet-American and Sino-American relations in the early 1980s was a significant factor (though far from the only one) in bringing Moscow and Beijing closer together.

Thus far, the Soviet leadership has been unwilling to make the kinds of far-reaching concessions that China has set as a precondition for a major improvement in their political--as opposed to economic--relations. The Soviet Union has refused to thin out its troops along the Sino-Soviet border or to give up its hard-won gains in Afghanistan and Indochina. However, it cannot be entirely ruled out that a Soviet perception of acute challenge from the West, in the form of threatened American superiority in SDI technology, might induce Moscow to make the concessions necessary to break the log jam in Sino-Soviet relations.

In politics, few things are impossible. The 1939 Nazi-Soviet rapprochement caught the world by surprise (as did President Nixon's announcement in 1971 that he would visit China). We should not underestimate the speed with which two highly centralized, authoritarian, and secretive governments can move. Nonetheless, there are good reasons for doubting that even if American successes in SDI decisively transformed the Soviet-American balance and relegated Moscow to a position of clear strategic inferiority the Soviet Union would respond with a more flexible policy toward China.

Soviet political culture and practice are extremely cautious and conservative. There is a strong disinclination to deviate from past behaviour, to launch bold diplomatic initiatives, and least of all to surrender tangible assets in the hope that some future benefit might result. This is one reason why the

Soviet Union has been unwilling to make the kinds of major concessions to China or Japan (in regard to the disputed islands) that might produce significant results. If the Soviet Union was unwilling to make such concessions at a time of strength (in the mid-1970s), it would be even less likely to do so at a time of acute weakness when it felt beleaguered and besieged. Increased intransigence and a heightened determination to accelerate the further buildup of Soviet military power, so as to intimidate its neighbours and protect itself against all conceivable dangers, is the far more likely response. Unilateralism, rather than constructive bilateralism, would be the order of the day.

Moreover, it should be noted that the Soviet leadership really does not have much room to maneuver. It will not relinquish its geopolitical gains in Afghanistan or Indochina; in each case, the Soviet goal is further expansion and not an orderly retreat.

While some symbolic thinning of Soviet troops along the border with China is possible, there are real limits to how far the Soviet Union can go. Siberia and the Soviet Far East are highly vulnerable because of their sparse population, their great distance from European Russia, and the logistical constraints on rapid reinforcement. The Trans-Siberian railroad, which runs close to the border, needs to be protected. The Soviet Union has invested vast sums of money in military infrastructure along the border (bases, airfields, depots, highways), which it is unwilling to abandon. The Soviet military establishment has consistently taken a hard line, and no Soviet leader would lightly tangle with it, especially when the nuclear arms race was accelerating.

Massive Soviet forces, which include not just troops but large numbers of SS-20 missiles, Backfire bombers, and tanks, are seen by the Soviet leadership as a means of intimidating and containing the Soviet Unions' adversaries. China

is deterred not just from striking at the Soviet Union but also from a major assault southward against the Soviet Union's ally, Vietnam. Moreover, Soviet forces in the Far East are directed not only at China but also at the United States and Japan. Since a future arms race in SDI technology would almost certainly stimulate heightened rivalry in other areas as well (including the Pacific), the Soviet Union would have a powerful incentive not to weaken its military forces in the Far East.

In short, whatever negative consequence SDI might have for Soviet-American relations, it is unlikely to produce a significant improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. The Soviet leadership is well aware that any warming of Sino-Soviet relations is far more likely to result in American overtures to Beijing than to Moscow (since the Soviet Union is perceived by the United States as representing a much greater threat), and it fears being used by China as part of that country's quest for American technological assistance which would assist China's modernization and increase its capacity to threaten Soviet interests.

Lastly, brief mention should be made of China's reaction to SDI. If, in future years, the Soviet Union were to achieve a major improvement in its missile defences, this would greatly reduce the credibility of the rudimentary Chinese nuclear deterrent. The Chinese have every reason to be as concerned about this possibility as do the British and the French.

To date, the Chinese reaction has been surprisingly low key. Although the Soviet-American competition in space weapons and BMD has been attacked as marking a qualitative leap in the arms race, Chinese denunciations of SDI have been highly propagandistic and primarily aimed at demonstrating Chinese superiority to--and equidistance from--both superpowers, who are carefully

depicted as being equally responsible for the acceleration of the arms race.[23] Chinese commentaries do not discuss the potential implications of BMD for Chinese security. One gains the impression that for now, the Chinese leadership is not overly concerned.[24] Workable missile defences are a long way off, and China faces more immediate problems of far greater urgency. If at some future date the Soviet Union were to thicken its missile defences and extend them beyond Moscow, China would have to respond. A Sino-Soviet arms race is thus a strong possibility. Should this occur, yet another source of Sino-Soviet tension would be exacerbated, and an insecure China would have an added incentive for seeking improved relations with the United States.

In addition, should an arms race in defensive technology result in acute strains in Soviet-American relations, China would clearly benefit. China's fears of superpower collusion at her expense would be lessened, as would Beijing's anxieties that Washington might cease to be sufficiently resolute in resisting Soviet expansion. The greater the threat emanating from the Soviet Union, the more peaceful and cooperative China would seem, by way of comparison, in American eyes. The U.S. interest in strengthening China as a counterweight to Soviet expansion in Asia would be further stimulated, and this, in turn, would facilitate Chinese access to military and non-military technology. Thus, as long as the Chinese feel they are secure from a Soviet attack, they may well conclude that the benefits they will reap from Soviet-American competition in SDI technology exceed the dangers.

Conclusion

I have argued that SDI is likely to influence the Sino-Soviet-American strategic triangle in a number of significant ways. The Soviet Union has long

emphasized a strong, well-developed defence as part of its strategic posture. Its propaganda campaign against SDI is disingenuous, hypocritical, and calculated to improve the Soviet Union's strategic position by manipulating the world's anxieties about nuclear war. Nonetheless, in view of the technological dynamism and prowess of American industry, the Soviet leadership is very much concerned about the possibility that the United States will surpass the Soviet Union and obtain a decisive lead in SDI technology.

This apprehension appears to have two likely consequences. In the short term, if the U.S. Administration is willing to use SDI as a bargaining chip, the Soviet Union may well be more forthcoming and agree to a significant reduction in offensive strategic weapons. However, if no limitations are placed on the quest for missile defences and an unrestrained arms race ensues, the resulting fears and tensions are likely to produce a major, long-term deterioration in Soviet-American relations.

I have also argued that should a further embitterment of Soviet-American relations occur, it is not likely to produce a Sino-Soviet rapprochement and the resuscitation of the earlier alliance between the two countries. The present partial normalization of Sino-Soviet relations will in all likelihood continue with or without SDI, but a total reversal of the present deep-seated antagonism between Moscow and Beijing, which is the product of sharply conflicting national interests, is highly improbable. Lastly, it was suggested that if Soviet-American relations were to chill further, and if the Soviet Union were to strengthen its missile defences to the point where China's retaliatory capacity was significantly diminished, this might have the consequence of pushing the United States and China closer together. Thus, the Sino-Soviet-American strategic triangle, whose configuration has changed dramatically under the

impact of past geopolitical shifts, is likely to be reshaped yet again as a result of SDI.

In concluding, it should perhaps be emphasized once more that the political imponderables associated with SDI are no fewer or less imposing than the technical uncertainties. We can confidently predict only that in both realms surprises are sure to come; for there are severe limits to logical deduction and historical extrapolation. As Oliver Wendell Holmes once cautioned: "A page of history is worth a volume of logic"; and the history of SDI will not be written for a long time.

Notes

[1]Soviet policy toward BMD and SDI is discussed in: Sayre Stevens, "The Soviet BMD Program," in Ballistic Missile Defence, ed. Ashton B. Carter and David N. Schwartz (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1984), pp. 182-220; Raymond L. Garthoff, "BMD and East-West Relations," in ibid., pp. 275-329; David B. Rivkin, Jr., "What Does Moscow Think," Foreign Policy, no. 59 (Summer 1985), pp. 85-105; Douglas A. Ross, Coping with "Star Wars": Issues for Canada and the Alliance (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Arms Control and Disarmament, 1985), Aurora Papers, no. 2, pp. 36-41; Jerry F. Hough, "Soviet Interpretation and Response," in Arms Control and the Strategic Defense Initiative: Three Perspectives, ed. Jerry F. Hough et al. (Muscatine, Iowa: Stanley Foundation, 1985), pp. 5-12; Soviet Military Power, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), pp. 43-59.

[2]Stephen M. Meyer, "Soviet Strategic Programmes and the US SDI," Survival 28 (November-December 1985): 274-75.

[3]Within a few days of President Reagan's March 1983 speech on SDI, General Secretary Andropov denounced it as an attempt at "acquiring the potential to deliver a nuclear first strike." Pravda, 27 March 1986, translated in Current Digest of the Soviet Press 35/13 (1983): 5. For a more recent commentary in the same vein, see V. Zhurkin, "O strategicheskoi stabil'nosti," SShA, January 1986, p. 12.

[4]Pravda, 28 June 1968, translated in Current Digest of the Soviet Press 20/28 (1968): 16.

[5]Coit D. Blacker, "The Kremlin and Détente: Soviet Conceptions, Hopes, and Expectations," in Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry, ed. Alexander L. George (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983), pp. 119-37.

[6]Robert G. Kaiser quoting an unidentified senior Soviet official in "Powerful But Isolated, Russia is on Defensive," Manchester Guardian Weekly, 21 October 1984; cited in Ross, Coping with "Star Wars", p. 37.

[7]Gertrude E. Schroeder, "The Soviet Economy," Current History 84 (October 1985): 311; Keith Bush, "Soviet Plan Fulfillment in 1985," Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, RL 47/86, 27 January 1986, pp. 1-3.

[8]Garthoff, "BMD and East-West Relations," p. 317.

[9]Jerry F. Hough, "Gorbachev's Strategy," Foreign Affairs 64 (Fall 1985): 45-46. Also see Jeremy Azrael and Stephen Sestanovich, "Superpower Balancing Acts," Foreign Affairs: America and the World 1985 64 (1986): 490.

[10]New York Times, 1 June 1986, p. 8.

[11]Seweryn Bialer and Joan Afferica, "The Genesis of Gorbachev's World," Foreign Affairs: America and the World 1985 64 (1986): 605-44.

[12]Archie Brown, "Change in the Soviet Union," Foreign Affairs 64 (Summer 1986): 1049-53.

[13]Pravda, 26 February 1986, translated in Current Digest of the Soviet Press 38/8 (1986): 4 (emphasis in the original).

[14] Ibid., p. 28.

[15]Francis Fukuyama, "Gorbachev and the Third World," Foreign Affairs 64 (Spring 1986): 715-16.

[16]New York Times, 24 May 1986, p. 4.

[17]For an excellent discussion of the theory and practice of the strategic triangle, see Norman D. Levin and Jonathan D. Pollack, Managing the Strategic Triangle: Summary of a Workshop Discussion (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1984). Also see Dan L. Strode, "Arms Control and Sino-Soviet Relations," Orbis 28 (Spring 1984): 163-88.

[18]Recent trends in Sino-Soviet relations are discussed in: James C. Hsiung, "Soviet-Chinese Détente," Current History 84 (October 1985): 329-33; Yan Mei, "The Maturing of Soviet-Chinese Relations," in Foreign Policy in an Uncertain World, ed. John J. Stremlau, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 481 (September 1985): 70-80; Bohdan Nahaylo, "Sino-Soviet Relations Still Bittersweet," Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, RL 143/86, 7 April 1986, pp. 1-6; Idem, "Sino-Soviet Relations: Progress Amid 'Stagnation'," Radio Liberty Research Bulletin, 335/85, 4 October 1986, pp. 1-7.

[19]Sino-Soviet trade and economic relations are examined in: Hsiung, "Soviet-Chinese Détente," p. 329; Nahaylo, "Sino-Soviet Relations Still Bittersweet," p. 4; Izvestia, 19 April 1986, translated in Current Digest of the Soviet Press 38/17 (1986): 5, 23. Also see New York Times, 22 March 1986, p. 6; 14 December 1985, p. 3; 29 December 1984, p. 1; 24 December 1984, p. 1; and 11 February 1984, p. 10.

[20]Gorbachev went out of his way to refer to China as a "socialist" country in his report to the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress. Current Digest of the Soviet Press 38/8 (1986): 30.

[21]New York Times, 16 January 1986, p. 6.

[22]Donald S. Zagoria, "The Moscow-Beijing Détente," Foreign Affairs 61 (Spring 1983): 868. Also see Seweryn Bialer, "The Sino-Soviet Conflict: The Soviet Dimension," in Soviet Policy in East Asia, ed. Donald S. Zagoria (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 93-119; Harry Gelman, "Soviet Policy Towards China," Survey 27 (Autumn/Winter 1983): 165-74; Vernon V. Aspaturian, "The Domestic Sources of Soviet Policy Toward China," in China, the Soviet Union, and the West, ed. Douglas T. Stuart and William T. Tow (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 39-57. The discussion of Sino-Soviet relations in this paper owes much to the insights of these authors.

[23]Sa Benwang, "A Qualitative Escalation in the Superpower Arms Race," Beijing Review 1985, no. 49 (9 December 1985), pp. 15-16; Zhuang Qubing, "United States Prepares for 'Star Wars'," Beijing Review 1984, no. 45, as excerpted in Survival 27 (January-February 1985): 35-38.

[24]Gerald Segal, "China and Arms Control," The World Today 41 (August-September 1985): 164.