

2. NUCLEAR AND SPACE ARMS: DEFENSE AND SPACE ARMS TALKS (DST)

BACKGROUND

The Defense and Space Arms Talks began in Geneva on 27 March 1985, as part of the Nuclear and Space Arms Talks (NST) between the Soviet Union and the United States. The NST also deals with long-range strategic nuclear weapons control (see NST:START). The aim of the Defense and Space Arms Talks is to prevent an arms race in outer space and in strategic defences. This issue has drawn considerable attention since the announcement by President Reagan on 23 March 1983 of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI or, as it is often referred to, Star Wars).

SDI aims to provide defence against incoming ballistic missiles. At present, it calls for research, development and testing of new weapon technologies, many of which would be based in outer space. These weapons may include "exotic" technologies such as lasers and particle beams, as well as more conventional anti-satellite (ASAT) and anti-ballistic missile (ABM) weapons. Naturally, there is a close link between this project and the status and future of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty signed between the Soviet Union and the United States in May 1972.

The ABM Treaty was the result of increased interest in anti-ballistic missile defence, on the part of both the US and USSR, throughout the 1960s. In the United States, the ABM issue sparked a prolonged public debate, centred on two main concerns: the ease with which the defences could be overcome by large numbers of cheaper offensive missiles, and the possibility that ABM deployments might destabilize deterrence based on the concept of mutual assured destruction. This concept, which had become the basis of nuclear deterrence, requires that both sides remain vulnerable to attack, thereby preventing aggression by either one.

The ABM Treaty prohibits both sides from deploying a nation-wide ABM defence and limits each to two ABM deployment areas, later amended on 3 July 1974 to one area. Extensive verification measures are provided for in the Treaty, which also established the Standing Consultative Commission (SCC) to deal with questions of interpretation and compliance. The United States Senate ratified the Treaty by a vote of eighty-eight to two.

During the 1970s both the United States and the Soviet Union continued research into ballistic missile defence. In 1976, the US dismantled the ABM system it had deployed at a missile base in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The Soviet Union has kept its ABM deployment around Moscow.

In his March 1983 announcement, President Reagan stated that the United States would pursue a new programme, SDI, aimed at providing a defence that would make nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." Although he initially stated that SDI was only a research programme and would be conducted within the limits of the ABM Treaty, the Administration adopted a "new" interpretation of the Treaty which would allow the US to carry out tests and development of systems previously considered prohibited by it.