

IV.

THE NEAR-TERM IMPACT OF THE STRATEGIC DEFENCE INITIATIVE (SDI)

The primary focus of this section is not the SDI, but the possible implications of the SDI programme for Canadian-US co-operation in continental defence. It is worth noting that initial US plans called for a decision in the early 1990s to move from research in the SDI programme to development and deployment. More recently, however, doubts have been expressed about this timing, suggesting slippage to the mid 1990s.¹⁷ Despite the protracted Canadian Parliamentary enquiry into SDI at the time of the recent NORAD renewal, it is possible that the next renewal of NORAD (in 1991) will also take place in an uncertain SDI environment.

In searching for the impact of SDI programmes on Canadian-US defence relations, therefore, the central reality is the uncertainty that surrounds both the programme elements and the timing of a development decision on ballistic missile defence. On the one hand, it is not difficult to note that if the surveillance systems associated with SDI are ever deployed, surveillance and defence against the manned bomber will be fundamentally changed. Space-based radars, for example, will probably be dual capable, able to scan for both missiles in space and aircraft close to the earth. Ground-based lasers and other weapons may be capable against both ballistic and air-breathing missiles. At that point, SDI and air defence would become merged both conceptually and operationally.

On the other hand, while it is tempting to contemplate a variety of systems which may result from the SDI research programme, the central reality is that no systems design has *yet* emerged from the programme. In particular, most observers now accept that a fully-developed population defence against missile attack cannot be deployed or even perhaps designed in the next twenty years.

In the near term, there are a number of factors which add to the uncertainty of the programme:

- (i) ***Congress and Defence Budgets:*** cost considerations, together with Congressional budgetary actions, may impede or even halt currently planned SDI programmes.
- (ii) ***Technological Progress:*** unanticipated technological success or persistent failure may accelerate or retard the SDI programme, possibly

¹⁷ *The Report to the Congress on the Strategic Defense Initiative* (June 1986) uses the following guarded language on the matter of timing: "In our role of defining feasibility and cost, we have structured our efforts to support an early 1990s decision on whether to proceed with confidence along a development path. In other words, the majority of effort needed from that point on should be engineering in nature rather than experimental." (pp. 11-13)