

START AND SDI

The steady push towards a START treaty in 1989 was accompanied by a parallel negotiation in Geneva on ballistic missile defences. As with the START negotiations, however, in the United States national decisions about the feasibility and desirability of Star Wars technologies, as well as considerations about the overall budget of the programme, seemed as likely to affect the outcome as did the negotiations in Geneva.

In January 1989 President Reagan's last budget request called for expenditures of \$US 5.9 billion on SDI with a view to an early decision on the deployment of a first phase ballistic missile defence. In his final report on the SDI programme, General Abrahamson, who retired as Chief of the SDI Office in February 1989, presented just such a view of the programme. His report envisaged a two-layered defence in the first phase of deployment. However, where previously heavy emphasis had been placed on the potential of a nuclear-pulsed, space-based x-ray laser, Abrahamson argued that the space-based system would be based on the concept of *brilliant pebbles* — small rockets with on-board guidance systems, some ten thousand of which would orbit in space with a capability to intercept ballistic missiles in flight.

For Abrahamson and the supporters of *brilliant pebbles*, one of the major advantages of the system was its alleged low cost in comparison with other space-based systems. *Brilliant pebbles* would be complemented by a ground-based interceptor system for mid-course and terminal defence against missiles, and with necessary battle management systems. Abrahamson estimated the cost of such a missile defence at around \$US 50 billion — a level which would make it comparable, for example, with the B-2 bomber programme. He also suggested that it would take two years to confirm the *brilliant pebbles* concept, and a further five years to deploy the system.

This optimism was not shared, however, either by Congress or the incoming Bush Administration. In April the revised defence budget submitted to Congress requested \$US 4.6 billion for SDI, a figure which was subsequently cut by Congress to \$3.1 billion. In his public statements, the President himself remained firmly committed to ballistic missile defence, but both Secretary of Defense Cheney and the new chief of SDI, Air Force General George Monahan, sounded frequent notes of caution. *Brilliant pebbles* was described as having "excellent potential," but emphasis was now placed on proving the concept over the next several years. The test programme for *brilliant pebbles*, moreover, suggested that there would be no conflict with the terms of the ABM Treaty until 1994. In these circumstances it was possible for the Bush administration to continue to support SDI, but

to shift the emphasis to research. While the new administration continued to insist that the ABM Treaty should not stand in the way of the deployment of a proven ballistic missile defence, continued adherence to the ABM Treaty, even in its 'narrow' interpretation, seemed likely at least for several years.

Whether or not influenced by such domestic developments in the United States, in the 1989 negotiations on space weapons the Soviets began to place less emphasis on the linkage between START reductions and adherence to the ABM Treaty. At the end of the eleventh round of negotiations in August 1989, the Soviet chief negotiator, Yuri Nazarkin, repeated the Soviet view that "fifty percent reductions in strategic offensive arms could be made possible only in conditions of non-emplacement of weapons in outer space and observance of the ABM Treaty." At the Wyoming meeting, however, Shevardnadze appeared to signal a major change in Soviet policy by delinking the two issues. Where previously the negotiations had sought to draw up a new treaty or agreement which would bind both sides to the ABM Treaty for a given period of time, Shevardnadze now suggested that both sides continue to abide by the 'traditional' interpretation of the Treaty, and agree that abrogation of the ABM Treaty would constitute grounds for the other party to withdraw from the START agreement.

One month later, in a speech to the Supreme Soviet, Shevardnadze addressed the allegation that the Soviet Union had not itself adhered to the ABM Treaty. Explaining the Soviet commitment to the ABM Treaty as the basis for strategic stability, he spoke of the Krasnoyarsk radar station which stood, he said, "the size of an Egyptian pyramid, representing, to put it bluntly, a violation of the ABM Treaty." Noting that the radar had been put in the wrong place, Shevardnadze explained that "it took us four years to get to the bottom of it."

For the United States, the Soviet proposal on withdrawal from the START agreement posed little or no problem, since the standard provision for withdrawal after six months on the grounds of "supreme national interest" in any case covered such an eventuality. The United States, however, would not formally accept the reference to the 'traditional interpretation', since the Bush administration had already reaffirmed its support for the broad interpretation without which it would not be possible to undertake full tests of space-based systems such as *brilliant pebbles*. In a situation where no such test was imminent, however, in the spring of 1990 it appeared that the two sides would continue to negotiate on space-based defences after reaching an agreement on strategic offensive forces.